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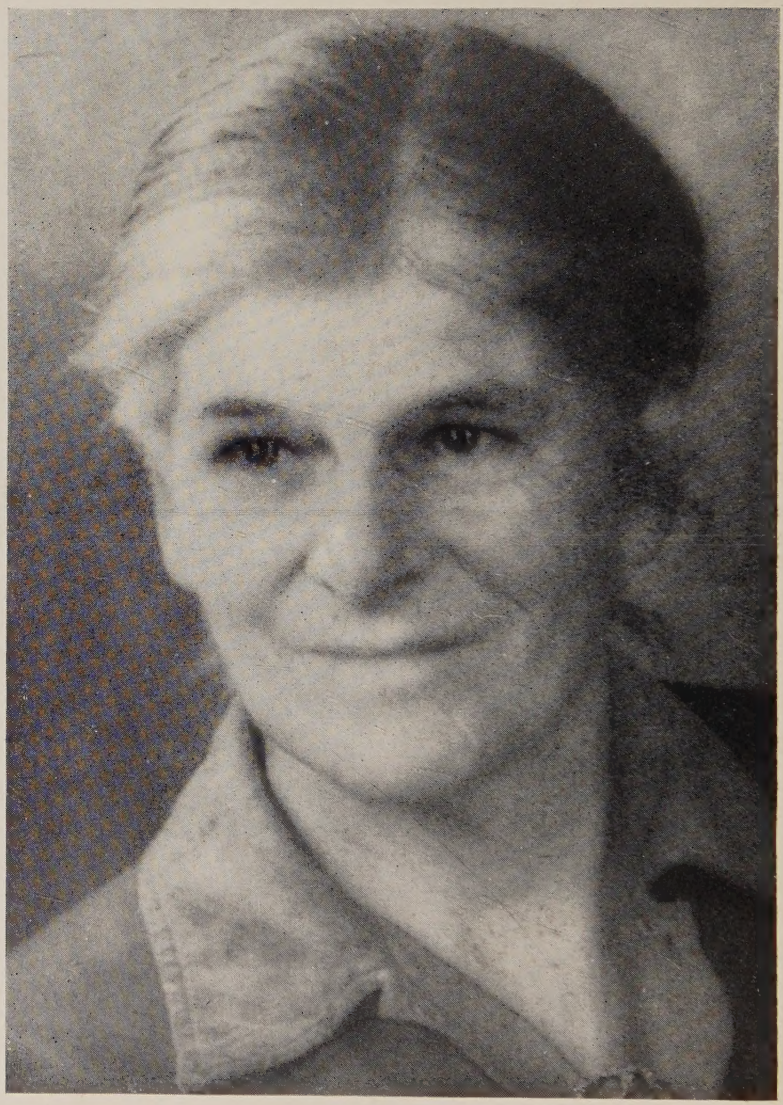

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THE HELFORD RIVER

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1

THE HELFORD RIVER

What is the Helford River?

So much more than a mere tongue of tidal water that flows up and down, up and down through the days and years and centuries between the little village of Gweek with its two bridges and the headlands of Dennis and Toll Point that stand like gate-posts between river and sea.

So much more than a waterway for sea-borne traffic that enters between those gate-posts and after passing Durgan, Treath, Passage, Helford, Porth Navas, Frenchman's Creek, Merthen Quay, Bishop's Quay and following the narrow channel in the ever-narrowing river, will eventually come in, on a high-tide, to rest at Gweek.

So much more even than the only natural barrier behind the Home Guard when they manned the Lizard peninsula expecting Hitler's invasion and his attack on Falmouth.

How much more?

Well, to begin with, there is all the river basin, that tract of country drained by the Helford and its tributaries; a land of secret valleys where flowers bloom all through the winter, of snipe-haunted moorland that lies open to the sky and is overgrown with the rampant Cornish heather, of hillsides gashed by granite quarries and crowned by granite boulders piled like the bricks of a child on many a crest of land; of woodland where oak saplings interlace their boughs in their struggle towards the light, of woodland where ancestral beeches stand in groups and every stem is like a monolith remaining in proud isolation from its neighbours; a land of ancient manor houses, of low cottages, some of which retain their beauty of thatched roof and white-washed walls, of irregular hamlets and villages and grey church towers; of strange pylons standing on their concrete bases and towering towards the sky with deserted Nissen huts beneath them; a land full of gardens, wild flowers, fungi, lichens, ferns

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and mosses all offering a whole world for those who love to discover and observe small forms of beauty.

Then there is the bird-life of the river which is to the onlooker a light-winged and ever-shifting pattern, outlined on sky or mud or water, of many hundred birds, gulls and curlews and lesser waders that fill the channels and the shores with unregulated music. To the bird-watcher this winged life on the river is a whole universe wherein strangers may at any time miraculously make their appearance, bringing a wild, exhilarating sense of far spaces that lie on the hither and thither side of their sojourn here. In a hard winter, when the sky beyond Gweek is blue-black and northern counties are in the grip of snow and ice, the upper reaches of the Helford may be dotted with hundreds of strange water-fowl, with ducks, mergansers, divers, godwits, plovers and even geese. Moreover at any moment of any season a solitary bird visitor may drop in from the upper air, only to depart again after a few days or a few weeks, drawn here by some urge or memory or instinct that we shall never understand.

There are the living creatures, too, that inhabit a world of mud and water unknown to us, the crabs and oysters and cockles and prawns and fishes, living their lives in apparent contentment although fate has denied them, in their sub-aqueous prison, the beneficent rays of the sun.

There are also the people who live near or beside the river. My own particular village is not actually within sight of the Helford and it stands over a mile away from the main channel but young and old are drawn as by a magnet to the water. Boys and girls learn to swim there and to row a boat. Mothers wheel their prams on Sunday afternoons to the shore where they can empty their minds of worry as they gaze at the quiet water. On Good Friday the men of the district set off in waders, carrying a sack, a bucket and a short-handled hoe to dig cockles from the mud. A few of the men keep a boat on some sheltered beach, using it for pleasure trips or fishing; each time that they push off from the mud or shingle they acquire a new sense of freedom as they feel beneath them the keel making silent headway through the water.

There are other people too whose lives have been closely

linked with the river and some of these I shall introduce in the pages of this book.

There is Maria Pendragon, ageless as the river itself, and all her family. There is the octogenarian of Gweek with his rich store of memories. There are the ghosts who played havoc with the security of Mrs. Bonanza and disturbed the sleep of Mrs. Lamley. There was also the Old Landlord, owner of a large part of the Helford shores, who, selfless and strong, upheld throughout his life whatsoever was of worth in the feudal system.

One and all of us owe much to the river, far more perhaps than we consciously recognize, for who can trace or assess the influence on our outlook of its rhythm and continuity?

2

THE OLD LANDLORD

The Old Landlord must come first because he played so large a part in saving the peace and beauty of the Helford river.

Time after time, in those years before rural preservation societies had risen up to safeguard us from our own suicidal tendencies, he would refuse to sell any plot on the margin of the river for building purposes. Being in his later years more or less crippled by arthritis, he could no longer wander along the river side but he remembered and loved every creek and beach and little promontory and was able to picture only too vividly what the consequences of such sales would have been.

He had seen jerry-built houses spring up like toadstools on the other side of the Helford and he had watched, in the course of years, small pink bungalows spawning in the country that was Home to him; some of those pink ones were even fitted with pale green fanlights above their doors. When he found himself in a position to check that mushroom growth, at any rate on his own side of the water, he resolved that he never would be tempted by profiteers.

After nearly half a century spent in the service of his country at home and abroad, he had inherited an ancient home, always known in local parlance as "The Mansion," together with a property which included many miles of the Helford river shores. The woods, beaches, fields and farms extending along the southern margin of the river from Gweek to Frenchman's Creek remained in the hands of the Old Landlord for many years, yet never, in all his time of ownership, did he betray or even feel any personal pride of possession concerning that lovely corner of England. He had realized, from his first day of taking up his inheritance, that it was an almost sacred trust. He knew, without voicing that knowledge to other people, that the beauty of his land must be kept inviolate, that digging for house foundations and drains must never be permitted on those shores of the river,

that no human dwelling, neither mansion, hut, nor pink bungalow should be allowed to arise and cast their reflections in those waters.

The tidal river had from time immemorial been the haunt of sea-birds, marine creatures and otters; a waterway for the boats that would pass up and down from Helford to Gweek and Gweek to Helford, without leaving any trace behind; the playing ground of winds and tides; a place full of ancient yet ever renewed beauty. And so it must remain as long as he had any say in the matter.

Always when he looked at the river, or thought of it, or made some sacrifice to preserve its setting, he felt that pride which a man may feel in serving a fair lady, a noble master, a worthy cause. He knew that certain reaches of the Helford owned him as their guardian, it never occurred to him that he was their owner and arbiter of their fate, because he viewed himself as a creature of a day while he was constantly aware of their eternal value.

So they possessed him, body, soul and bank-book, and he paid their tithes and taxes as if it were a privilege to do so.

With regard to this matter of the Old Landlord's privileges a digression must be made in order to record a certain incident. There will be many digressions in my twenty-five years' story of the Helford. It could hardly be otherwise. Living with or beside the slow-moving river, how could one fail to acquire something of its leisured sinuosity? I do not apologize for such wanderings; after all, what is a digression but a happy, truant curve, defying the austerity of a straight line?

I cannot vouch for the accuracy of this little incident which is, alas, already becoming historical and soon may belong to the realm of myth. It is always by such stages that living, speaking, solid human beings pass away into companionship with the ghosts of the past. All the same I believe it to be true and many of us know that it is typical of what the Old Landlord would have felt and said on such a given occasion.

He was interviewing, on the subject of her pig-sty, an old woman who rented one of his smaller farms. She was demanding repairs, with a string of apologies for her request. His relation-

ship with tenants had always been paternal. He put his head a little on one side, looked at her with those piercing blue eyes that always seemed to see worlds within worlds and, assuming that smile which could conquer men, women and children alike, he replied:

"Mrs. Bosinver, it is my privilege, as your landlord, to repair your pig-sty when the need arises. It shall be put in order."

Of course he never stated in so many words, perhaps he did not even acknowledge to himself that those shores of the Helford river owned him. Nevertheless, all his days he felt a deep responsibility towards the beauty, seasonably variant, repetitive, elusive, which was ever present in and beside the river; beauty caught and held by the moving tides, bearing year after year as it had borne century after century a message neither legible nor audible. It would always be the message that a man's soul may receive from the earth and the sea when he leaves his fellow-beings and wanders away to linger in uninhabited places.

It must not be supposed that the Old Landlord, even before his infirmity seized him, spent his days dreaming on the banks of the river, gazing at reflections, studying bird-life, mesmerized by the sound of wind among oaks and beeches. The pressure of business from letters on his writing-desk and from human beings on his doorstep kept him not only alert and wide-minded but also fully occupied. He owned not only the land encircling his home but also many thousand acres in other parts of the county; he owned too an ancient and honourable name which he shared with a horde of often-impecunious relations, to say nothing of the rambling Mansion with one wing dating from Tudor times. All these responsibilities brought many claims on his attention and a day spent on or beside the river was a day of escape seldom achieved. Never in all his life had he found much leisure for dreaming and yet one could see in his eyes the power of dreams, that distant illuminated look which betrays constant awareness of things remote from the mud at one's feet, the marmalade on one's breakfast-table, the overdrawn account at one's bank.

Because he was imbued with a deep and abiding sense of his duty to his neighbour and because he was a born and accustomed listener, he found himself often in the position of holding an

informal court of justice, without advocates or ceremonial. When anyone came to him with some trouble that might concern arrears of rent, a pig, a cow, a quarrel, or even a wife, he would always meet his visitor on equal terms and never would his well-considered advice be disputed. Sometimes it was actually a husband or a husband's conduct that was under discussion, for women, as naturally as men, would come to him for counsel.

Once, so it was reported in the district, he went so far as to order a wedding; the overdue marriage ceremony was duly performed and the couple lived "happy ever after," just as couples always lived in the old-fashioned stories.

To cringers, shirkers and pretenders he gave short audience and curt dismissal, although to his own tenants, whatever might be their failings, he was notoriously considerate. Nor was it only in their troubles that people came to him, for he was like a little king in the neighbourhood, so much so that after any unusual event men would come to him with the news and would eagerly await his comments.

There was a certain undersized and somewhat undeveloped man living in one of his cottages, a casual labourer from whom he had only taken a shilling a month in rent for many years past. One day this man came up to the Mansion and asked for an interview with the Old Landlord. He came in, trembling like a reed, turning his cap round and round with both hands.

"Sit down, Obadiah," said the Old Landlord. "What can I do for you?"

This was his usual opening to any interview.

" 'Tes like this 'ere Sir," said Obadiah Treleggan. "I bin left a fortune all of a sudden like. Me sister in Canada she've bin an gone an died an they've wroate me as how theare's a hundred and seventy six pounds a-comin across the sea to me in a letter. An now I should like for to pay me rent, what you've always forgiven me, an thank you kindly Sir."

The Landlord refrained from trying to explain to Obadiah the difference between capital and interest but he did persuade him that the best thing would be for him to put his money in the post-office savings bank and keep it for a rainy day, letting the old agreement stand with regard to rent. As Obadiah left the

room the Old Landlord looked after his shambling figure and then he turned to his agent who had just come in and said: "They always told me that Obadiah was half-witted. I wish I had more half-witted neighbours."

The business and the personal affairs of his tenants occupied much of his time but he had also many claims to weigh that concerned his uninhabited property and, as for the river, never a year would pass without some stranger approaching him with a request that he would sell a plot of land on the Helford shores for building purposes. The most coveted spot was the site of an old fish-cellar, now completely overgrown with elder, bracken and blackthorn, a little promontory that commanded three arms of the channel and had become the green haunt of birds and rabbits. It was a perfect site for a bungalow, or so it seemed to every would-be purchaser. The answer was always "No."

If you imagine that there was anything automatic or autocratic about the Old Landlord's "No" to these people, then your picture of him is not at all clear.

Yet he could be autocratic and forbidding when the need arose for a stern reply to importunate people. There was, for example, the occasion when, one morning about a week before Christmas Day, seven spivs arrives from a town thirteen miles distant, alighting from a hired car. Actually the name "spiv" had not come into general use at that time, although no doubt the gentlemen themselves existed without having as yet earned the honourable mention. These young men entered his little private garden, stood outside his study window and set to work on "O Come All Ye Faithful" with their hands in their pockets. Four of them bellowed, one warbled, the other two just gazed about them as if the place was their own. The Old Landlord went out and stood on the threshold, fixed his piercing eyes on them and, cutting short their music in the middle of a long-drawn-out "ad-ore Him," demanded to know their origin and their purpose. When he learned that they had come in a taxi he drew himself up stiffly. He gave the leader one look and then swept his glance over the group like a hose-pipe jetting out icy water, forth and back, forth and back.

"I did not expect you, I did not invite you and I do not want you," he said. "Good-morning."

Then he went in and shut the door.

Yet, in the matter of the builders' dream and the would-be settlers, he never gave a thoughtless and automatic negative. He would weigh every application on its merits, treating each applicant with a formal, old-world courtesy. Who was he to prevent an honest man making his home in a beautiful situation? Who was he to make his rules because he happened to own land? He felt his own responsibility acutely but he never forgot the claims of the river.

Sometimes a stranger would come forward and offer him a very large price for a few yards of land. In those days, with his property heavily mortgaged, his expenses steadily rising and claims for his help never lessening, he found it difficult to square expenses with income. But he never, up to the day of his death, found any warrant, either in a stranger's importunity or in his own urgent need, for giving over any part of the river bank to desecration.

His method of dealing with problems is sometimes described as "taking the long view" and assuredly, in his dealings with the Helford and its unspoilt beauty, he took the long view, not from force of habit but from a deep conviction about what was due from himself to the river. He knew that beside the waters of that river men might move from time into eternity, they might sit there quietly in rain or sunshine in order to escape from themselves and to experience that madness of which Plato wrote, that madness imputed to those who lose their identity in recollection of the true beauty which the soul of man saw once when following God.

It was not for him, a mere single-life guardian of the river, to allow any little creature of a day to squat upon those shores in a pert bungalow; it was not for him to permit the erection of any building that would break in on the quietness of those fields and slopes of bracken, on the reflections of those clouds and trees, on the solitude of those herons, ducks, gulls and curlews.

There came a day when the gap between income and expenses had to be closed, for the interest payable on mortgages was draining away the life-blood of the estate. There was only one solution of the problem and that was a sale of land. The choice

was a bitter one, for it lay between some farms stretching down to the Helford shores and a certain property near Land's End, a place from which the Old Landlord's family had originally come. That property had been in the hands of his family for eight hundred years and now he, who had an almost passionate pride of race, faced the situation with dismay.

He sold the Land's End property and the Helford shores remained free from possessive-minded people.

This landowner was a man who fulfilled, quite literally, his duty to his neighbour as taught by the Catechism, but while he was a good neighbour to people of all degree he was never promiscuously sociable. His wife, who appeared to be a silent shadow of a woman, was always beside him. Some of us suspected that if she were only a shadow he would never have married her; be that as it may, he was always contented with her companionship and with that of his trees and flowers and his wild bird friends, while he followed his quiet routine of letter-writing, interviews, reading and working in the garden. Long after his arthritis had doomed him to crippled movements with two sticks, he continued to work with his arms, propping himself with one hand while he pruned shrubs or sawed down laurels that had grown to the height of trees.

As for his bird friends, the chaffinches, blue-tits, great-tits, coal-tits, marsh-tits and robins, they would follow him round the garden and take pea-nuts from his hand, while a nuthatch came daily to his window when he was dressing. In his pocket he always kept not only pea-nuts for all the birds but also a small tin filled with scraps of cheese for his most familiar robin. His favourite look-out in the garden faced north-east towards the river; there he would often sit on a bench to listen for the cry of the curlews, while he travelled in spirit to wild places that he had known in active years.

I have dwelt upon the Old Landlord at some length because his life, or rather his death, marked the end of an epoch in that story of the Helford which I shall try to tell. And yet, since an epoch is but a period of time that holds events, why should the river be connected with any such arbitrary term? For the ever-flowing river offers no surface to the pressure of events. Wars begin and

end, governments rise and fall, men perfect their machines, lose their innocence, achieve speedy and ever speedier movement, forget the beauty of the daisy and the dewdrop and the star, bemuse themselves with their own inventions and turn their backs on the ancient sanctities of quietude and silence. But, in the river, the tides that ebb and flow will suffer no repeal of laws nor change of government; the water, cleft asunder by a hurrying steam-boat, will fold itself together again and the throbbing noise of those engines will be caught and held and muffled by the listening trees on either shore. Now and then storm winds may churn the main reaches of the current into a rolling sea and the upper boughs of the oaks in Calamansac and Merthen and Bonallack woods will be tossing in sympathetic frenzy, but in the deep heart of the river those twin sanctities abide and there are days in every season of the year when one may wander along those shores in a silence profound as the silence in a temple.

For myself there have been many hours of deep contentment spent on and beside the river but they belong to no time and are not remembered for the sake of any achievement; even in catching prawns, gathering mushrooms, sitting among the bluebells, the weight recorded or the basket filled or the flowers picked were not the true harvest of the day. A sense of care-free happiness in those occupations remains, and will remain, like a long afterglow.

It is, for the most part, a tale of happiness and beauty that I shall try to unfold, disconnected, undated, indeed perhaps it is hardly a story at all, for the river pays no tribute and offers no salute to our universal tyrant Time; not for him the law of Aristotle, the considered links between beginning and middle and end.

Nor is the timeless river confined in space, as one might think from a glance at the map, from a journey by boat up the ever-narrowing channel to Gweek, from a walk along the muddy foreshore or among the oaks that overhang those shores. Many streams come down from the country on the north and west and south. They come rippling, rushing, chattering, purling, babbling through tussocks of grass and rushes, across meadows

of sedge, yellow iris, hemlock and angelica, through many a beechwood and mixed coppice, over boulders, stones and pebbles; they are the voices of the wild hedgerow and the woodland and the downs; they are the tribute of that bleak upland where men have gashed their granite quarries into the land, leaving stone rims to cut the sky; they are the largesse of that moorland where fine grass and tufts of heather hold every shade of gold, brown, russet, ochre and purple, of those rush-grown corners of small holdings that lie in secret places, of those beflowered swamps where ragged-robin, meadow-sweet, scabious and willow-herb follow one another through the seasons in ceremonial procession.

All day and every day, all night and every night, the river receives water, his own life-blood, flowing down to him from beside the homes and hamlets of Traboe, Trewince, Tregevas, Lean, Caervallack, Carabone, Gilly, Meanlay, Chygarkye, Treverry, Zula, Nancemerrin, Mellangoose, Treloquithack, Boswidjack, Carwythenack, Treworvack and Treviades; and twice in every twenty-four hours he goes forth to lose himself in the greater continuity of the sea, taking part in a miracle which is the be-all and end-all and renewal of his own life.

There is also his communion with the sky, that seems to be imbued with a desire to touch, caress and enfold the river, for every colour, every movement and every mood is duplicated below. Driving cloud will skim the water and pass on; beneath a cloudless sky the water will assume a deeper shade of blue; on a grey and sunless day it will be leaden-coloured. To imagine the river without the sky is not possible.

In this picture of the river we have, apparently, passed from endless time into endless space. Often, without intention, do we overstep that boundary. Perhaps there is no boundary after all.

Years rolled on bringing no perceptible change to the shores of the Helford, no smudge on its beauty, no disturbance of its peace. Those shores remained, while ostensibly in the hands of one man, the property of all who loved to wander in solitude and there was no pill-box of bricks and mortar to intrude its presence on the earth, its reflection in the water. In matters connected with the oyster-beds on the river's mud, the shingle on its

beaches, the fields and timber on its shores, the Old Landlord would only give judgment after due consideration of the immemorial beauty of that tidal inlet, as if it were a human being needing his protection.

The place was a sanctuary and he was its guardian, for although he had fought in three wars, he was above all a lover of peace and beauty.

3

CATCHING PRAWNS

The Old Landlord was not alone in his reverence for the beauty of the Helford.

On the other side of the river lived his friend Kimiel Pendragon, with his wife Maria, their three sons and one daughter. All the Pendragon family had the sea in their veins; except Maria who hardly knew aft from forward though she listened patiently and happily for many years to the talk of the other five, talk, in season and out, of designing and building boats, of cruising, fishing and yacht-racing. She was, however, first and foremost in their permanent campaign against any action that would despoil the beauty of the river.

There was a tacit agreement between this family and the Old Landlord that while he preserved the sanctities of the southern shore they would keep their great promontory of oak woods on the northern side inviolate. Even in order to gain a view of open sea from their windows, they would not cut the oak saplings that enclosed their home, lest the sight of roof and chimneys might spoil the beauty of the estuary for people on incoming yachts.

Soon after I came to live in the Helford district Maria and I formed a close alliance which has remained firm to this day. In those good leisured years before the war we shared many diversions but none so filled with pure enjoyment as those hours spent catching prawns in Abraham's Bosom.

What uncouth words, "catching prawns!" Yet they recall, as if they were two notes of a musical bell, times of abandonment to the joy of the moment, a certain careless freedom felt intimately, as one may feel wind or sunshine on one's face. I think that every member of our little party felt this sense of freedom on our prawning expeditions.

Some of us would arrive by land and some by water, each one carrying, of course, a long-handled net over one shoulder and a

hessian bag tied over one hip; the net had an iron frame and would measure about nineteen inches across. Now and then one of us who happened to be shamelessly prawning for the pot on account of an influx of summer visitors, would arrive with a huge professional net that was wooden-framed and three feet across the front, fashioned for longer, wider dips and larger catches. For those who wielded such a net there would never be the excitement of stalking and outwitting individual prawns. I had two miles to row down river and always wore ancient sand-shoes full of holes, so that while some holes let the water in others would as surely let it out; a skirt that had become almost a museum piece, being moth-eaten, bedraggled and faded from scarlet to a very beautiful orange; a much-mended jersey with pockets to hold string for net repairs; and a battered felt hat kept, like the skirt, for these special occasions.

"Why not a bathing-dress and be done with such contrivances?" the unsympathetic onlooker might ask. I could only reply, "Too cold." Wading waist-deep, or even knee-deep, is apt to produce a sense of chill after a few hours and even on the hottest day of summer a little cool wind will often arise suddenly in the creeks of our river.

Maria would come down from her home in the oak woods in a mood of insouciance, gaily clad as any popinjay. Once she had assumed her clothes and quitted her mirror, she would be blithe as a lark for the rest of the day. Her linen coat and skirt was mellowed by time but it still retained streaks and patches of heavenly blue and the silk scarf round her head was imprinted with a white Japanese stork in flight on an orange background. Her handkerchief, edged with lace, was continually falling into the water for she had never owned a pocket; a pearl necklace and a diamond brooch lent her a regalian aspect and she always wore silk stockings with her high-heeled canvas shoes. Whenever we laughed with her about those stockings and repeated to each other the legend that there was French blood in her and that she had web feet and was ashamed of showing them, she would excuse her stockings by murmuring something about suspenders and "keeping herself together." Physically she had, at that time, no need to keep herself together for she was active

and well-formed, and of course where her mind was concerned her great charm was that she never had kept herself together, nor accepted slavery to consistent thought, nor suffered the constraint of a matter-of-fact outlook, nor troubled herself with rigid standards for other peoples conduct.

She always reminded me of some beautiful seaweed in a pool, swaying under every ripple that came sweeping in to her from the great ocean of life and love and laughter that circumscribes our world. Amid her family Maria reigned supreme in their woodland home, not by virtue of any exercised authority but because of something elusive about her that acted as a magnet.

Had she chosen her own incarnation, she would have gone softly all her days, clad in silk, reclining on a Madame Recamier sofa, encircled by dim lights and her chosen scents and food and friends. Or so she would often think to herself as she slithered about the Pendragons' wood and fields in gum boots, feeding innumerable fowls and collecting their eggs for her innumerable friends and family, picking and packing flowers for market and entertaining the succession of familiar and also of foreign guests brought home by her children. But on prawning days Maria harboured no thoughts of other employs or other incarnations. She would live fully in each moment of each hour, head stooping over the water as she pushed forward on her quest, hands busy emptying the net as she stood still, not speaking much, only now and then, when she found a larger than ordinary crab in her catch, emitting a shrill cry to summon a friend, usually myself, who would come and pick it out for her with thumb and finger placed longwise on the shell.

Yes, those were care-free days indeed, yet we were not careless in our movements. Catching prawns is the most absorbing occupation in the world; you employ, in the pursuit of this pop-eyed, wary, forward-moving, backward-darting crustacean, the concentration of an artist at his work and you attain, perhaps, a Yogi's loss of selfhood.

As you stalk and stoop, plunge your net to scrape ledge or bottom, straighten your back, pick prawns from the net and drop them in your bag, and then repeat the whole manoeuvre again and again, you have no past nor future. Your whole being is

pinned down to the conquest and capture of one prawn after another. You do not observe the blue sky overhead, the sunlight on the oak woods, the white or red or brown sails of the boats that come in and out of the Bosom, so appropriately named on account of the safe anchorage that it affords for yachts, nor the sparkle on the face of the water. The beauty of the day, although you may be dimly aware of it, does not make a direct appeal to your senses. You are the primitive hunter with every sense alert to follow and secure your prey. Often you must put in your net and work by faith, sliding it along mud or shingle, keeping the iron lip in touch with the floor of the sea so that no prawn shall slip away below the net. Scrape, scrape, scrape, you go patiently forward, stooping to the water, fixing your eyes ahead on a tuft of seaweed into which you push the prawns; then, while they rest a moment in false security, you give a swift upward movement of your net, shake into it all the contents of the tuft and bring it up to examine your haul.

Sometimes you can look down through clear water to a patch of shingle and note every movement of each tail and eye and whisker; then, with slow-motion performance of net and body, you ape the measured pace of tidal water or drifting weed to which the prawn is accustomed, you stalk your individual prey and he will at last come sailing into your net, mistaking the meshes for a new kind of seaweed, or he may take fright and dart backward like a thing released from a spring, to lurk in a patch of weed where you pursue him with the usual scraping tactics.

It is strange that while so many people talk about shrimps and shrimping, few, except addicts like ourselves, will ever mention prawns. Fishwives who earn their living in the water of our southern coasts, tourists paddling about with children's nets in the sandy pools of our western beaches, epicures who sup at Brighton, housewives who bring home small pink objects in a paper bag, all these are eloquent about shrimps but you never hear the word "prawn" on their lips and often some "foreigner" will correct me if I speak of our prawning parties. I usually give one look at the poor dry-footed ignoramus and then keep silence after he has said, with a benevolent landlubber's smile: "Shrimp-

ing you mean." Then we each go our own way, he with his shrimp and I with my prawn "fixation." Yet there should be no confusion between the two for they differ in appearance and habits.

The shrimp is smaller than the prawn, it is sandy in colour and indeed it is sometimes almost transparent, while the prawn is brownish-green or, when seen in sunlit water, clear green; now and then one may meet an albino prawn. Shrimps frequent sandy pools and bury themselves in the sand when pursued, while prawns frequent seaweed. Prawns are larger than shrimps. I once saw prawns feeding greedily on the half-decayed corpse of a lobster in a large pool near the mouth of the Helford but when I brought the catch in to my hostess I did not go into particulars about their last meal. Both shrimps and prawns have whiskers, hard shells, goggle eyes and darting movements and both might grace a Walt Disney film. As a matter of fact some of our neighbours have suggested that we ourselves, in our prawning rig, might be worthy of that honour.

One of the charms of the occupation is that there is always something new to be discovered about the haunts and habits of prawns. When you are pursuing them all your faculties of observation must be awake.

Their mass movements, for example, depend largely on the weather. If you set out to catch them on a cold and windy day you will most likely be unsuccessful. To attain the prawner's paradise you need a spring tide, the right place, the right weather, which is a day of summer sunshine and utter stillness, a recognized weedy haunt of the prawns and several hours' leisure enabling you to be in the water an hour before low-tide. Your best moment should be when the tide begins to flow and to bring in fresh prawns from the open sea to their in-shore feeding grounds.

They come by ones and twos, they come in single file, they come in phalanxes and hordes, and happy is the fisherman who can find, in those particular moments of their arrival from the ocean, a line of clear water with sand at the bottom and seaweed or rock on either side. Then he will only have to stand still, hold his net in the channel of the main advance, keeping it low, and

wait for his prey to sail into it. If, however, the channel is wider than the net, then all his art and wariness must come into play, for the prawns will dart now forward and now back, they will flip themselves into the shelter of a tuft of seaweed, they will disappear under a rocky ledge, they will be quicker than thought, more wily than thieves, often defying with ultimate success all the cunning and caution and patience of the pursuer.

Such conditions are not often found on the Helford river even in the good prawning months of July, August, September and October. To begin with, there is everywhere too much mud and too little sand, in few places is there clear water to be found over a solid bottom. Then there are often those little flurries of wind that will enter the most secret creek, rippling the water and obscuring all view of what goes on below the surface. There are also the hopeless days of summer gales.

No, indeed, this walt-sater occupation is not merely the idle diversion of an idler's life. In fact it calls for many of the higher human qualities, demanding nothing less than total concentration, fortitude and considerable energy. A statesman in pursuit of prawns would assuredly cast off his cares of office, a miser would forget his gold and aged kings might find their youth again.

We all of us remember what happened once to Mrs. Polwheverel, who was middle-aged, stout, dignified but gifted with the spirit of eternal youth. She was also the leading light of many County Committees, being chairman of Noughts and Crosses, founder of homes for the Spiteful and Ungracious, and president of a society bent on preserving newts and lizards. One day, in despair at seeing her large pile of unanswered letters, she took to the water at noon in full prawning kit, brown holland coat and skirt and shady straw hat. Three o'clock found her with heavily weighted bag on one hip, fingers blue with cold, skirt sagged and dripping at the hem, still wading happily in the Bosom. She was quite oblivious of the fact that her committee had assembled in the town nine miles distant and was now awaiting her in a state of helpless inactivity.

Many a one with a troubled mind or lonely heart has forgotten all their burdens during a few hours spent in pursuit of prawns.

The movements of these sea-creatures are incalculable, not

only their individual jerks and flips, sorties and retreats when facing a pursuer, but also their mass movements to feeding waters, breeding grounds and submarine places of shelter. How little we know about the home life of the prawn and how thankful we should be for that ignorance. The behaviourist school of writers, those people who love to analyse the emotions of a bird, to expose the secret thoughts of an animal in human terms, have not yet, so far as I know, made a victim of the prawn. I like to think of him when he leaves his summer waters for the unexplored depths of the sea, returning with light heart to some submarine place of prawn amenities that we could neither reach nor imagine; perhaps to some rock palace adorned with coloured, swaying seaweed and star-fish and ever-moving fins and mermaids that sing their songs of love, where the deep waters heave gently to and fro or hardly heave at all and no cold wind can enter, a place unvisited by push-nets and human legs and peering human faces.

When it comes to the cooking of prawns there is only one worthy method and one worthy place. They must be boiled in sea-water over a bonfire that you have kindled on the beach while you and your paraphernalia are still dripping salt water and while the unfortunate creatures are still flipping in the bags. It always seems cruel to cast those twitching shell-fish alive into boiling water but if you do it with a swift movement then their death will be instantaneous and each one will change from a living green to a dead pink in the very moment that it is covered by the water.

There is many an ardent prawner who will not touch any shell-fish on a plate; the sport means much to them but the food supply does not count at all. Others, like Maria Pendragon who adores a bargain, will count the mutton chops they are saving, when the family sits down to a dish of prawns, with a happy sense of having got Something for Nothing from the land, or rather from the sea. Not all the dishes of the epicures, not curried prawns, nor prawns in white sauce, nor mayonnaise can rival a dish of prawns for tea, eaten cold with a simple, old-fashioned slice of bread-and-butter. There is a chill, clean flavour about them when eaten only an hour or two after they are caught, you

feel, as you chew the curiously stiff food, as if the purity of sea-breezes were lingering for a moment on your palate.

Prawns are nomads. Within my own memory the local ones have shifted their ground, deserting one place and adopting another without apparent reason. It may be that the supply of seaweed will fail on one beach and increase on another, or it may be that changes take place on the sea-floor, changes which attract or repel them, developments such as the silting up of mud, the washing in or out of shingle, the increase or decrease of sand.

There is one beach on the open coast near the Lizard where prawns were plentiful some forty years ago but now the place is like an empty ball-room on the morning after the dance. It is bare. Generally speaking that particular seaweed with the bubbles that pop when you tread on them will prove to be a favourite lurking place for prawns and the amount of this weed that washes into or out of our beaches and rivers, season after season, is variable. The increase or decrease of this weed in a given place is easily observed by the human eye but as for the good prawning summers and the bad ones, as for the seasons of small prawns and the seasons of large ones, these are unpredictable and inexplicable, defying alike the pomposity of prophets and the cocksureness of those who depend on mechanical measurements.

Even if one were to confine one's interest to a small river like the Helford it would take a life-time of observation before any intimacy with the ways of prawns was achieved. It does, however, seem certain that Abraham's Bosom is a favourite and more or less permanent haunt. Beneath the Calamansac woods that rise from the west shore of the Bosom there is a long stretch of shingle, longer than any other beside the river, and along this beach you can usually catch prawns in clear water, stalking them one by one. Opposite this beach you may catch them in plenty around the little rocky point of Pedn Billy and there is also good ground on the beach that is known as The Bar. You need a small boat here so that you can cross quickly from Pedn Billy to Calamansac and back again, according to the state of the tide and the number of the prawns. If it were not for the oyster-beds you could catch them for several hours after the tide has begun to flow on the muddy shores above the bend that leads to Porth Navas.

There are other favourable grounds in the river but none is quite so spacious nor so reliable as Abraham's Bosom, while there are many beaches where you may wade and search and plunge in your net again and again without ever seeing or catching a prawn.

Off Groyne Point, where the oak woods of Merthen taper to a tongue that divides the main river from the Constantine creek, they are sometimes plentiful. Under the west bank of Penarvon Cove is another favoured spot. Beside Tremayne boathouse there lies a muddy stretch some fifty yards long where they may always be found and down-river from the eastern tip of Vellan Tremayne there is another short stretch always haunted by prawns in the summer.

A few hundred yards from Bishop's Quay, at that moment of low water when the tide has just turned to come in, I once stood in the main channel of the river and felt the whole place alive with movements. At high tide big ships would be steaming up to Gweek in this same channel but now I stood in eighteen inches of water. Whiskers pricked my legs and soft or scaly forms brushed against them, but in a few moments the tide was flowing so swiftly that it was not possible to see any of the prawns and crabs and fishes about me. Between Helford Passage and Trebah beach I once had a miraculous catch of prawns in the green grass-like weed that grows in flat ribbons on sandy bottoms and it was near Trebah beach, in a deep pool, that I interrupted, with finality, those prawns that were gorging on dead lobster.

As for the personnel of our summer parties in the river, it consisted of two or three middle-aged "steadies" to keep Maria and myself company, with, usually, the addition of a few "come-by-chance" visitors. Among the "steadies" there was first and foremost Lady H., a worthy second to Maria in point of picturesqueness and vitality. She was a hardy annual, hailing from Cambridge and appearing each summer to spend many weeks on her house-boat in the Bosom. She was obliged by doctor's orders to keep her feet dry and before she could take to the water we always had a communal struggle over tying her into her garments with odds and ends of string, hitching up the tops of her fisherman's waders by a cord run round her waist and

then helping her into layer after layer of decaying, sunset-hued, woollen jerseys that had long ago lost their buttons and their shape. When she was equipped she looked like an armadillo or a diver ready for action but once in the water she would acquire full mobility and she was always the most ardent member of our party. All through the cold winters, away in her fenland country, she would dream of summer days on the Cornish river, hearing in nostalgic day-dreams the flip-flip of prawns in the bottom of her bag.

At the other end of the scale, as regards superfluity of clothing, was a friend who always took to the water lightly encumbered. Having retained, in her maturity, a perfect shapeliness of leg and ankle, she could see no reason to hide these lights under a bushel. By the simple expedient of tucking all her upper garments into the elastic of her very short nether ones, she achieved a silhouette resembling one of those young Princes in the Tower who wore doublet and trunk-hose.

My own appearance, so I was told by the candid members of the party, resembled nothing in this world except Farmer Roskilly's scarecrow. At a later period Farmer Roskilly was overheard complaining: "I don't hold weth they effigies no more. I used to dress she up in me old jackuts but since them spivs from London come down and pinched the clothing off her peg I shaan't dress her again, never no more." So now, alas! after all these years and just when my prawning clothes are falling to pieces, I am bereft of my prototype.

The Pendragon offspring spent nearly every day of the summer away in their boats on the open sea but there were usually Pendragon nieces and nephews and friends staying with the family and to many of these our local manner of amusing ourselves was a new experience which they shared with astonishment, toleration or ever-growing enthusiasm, according to their individual tastes.

It seems, looking back on those summer day, as if the river were always calm and the weather always sunny, as if we ourselves had never entertained a care or thought that could break in on the pleasant hour.

4

HERONS AND OAK TREES

I have seen the unpredictable river in many moods and have shared those moods through many years. Now it may be the setting for a picnic party and now the witness of a solitary dreamer's frozen attitude. Now it is the refuge of half-starved birds come down from northern snows and then a death-trap for the geese, since poachers, like the poor, are always with us. Now it serves as mirror to its own marginal world, without a fleck or ripple, and then it is crested with thousands of white sea-horses in unbridled movement. With unseen gesture it will waft a vessel on its way or lure an old man to his muddy death.

One summer morning in the leisured years that we so thoughtlessly enjoyed before 1939, I felt a sudden longing to spend a day at Merthen; in certain oak woods that are down-river from the ancient ford. Reaching out for the tide-chart compiled by wise men many moons ago, I studied the figures that foretold the exact hour of high water and low water on each day and each night of the year. Precisely at 12.53 p.m. to-day, in response to the call of the moon, the purpose and direction of the flowing river would be changed. To-day then I would be able to walk bare-footed down the side channel below Bishop's Quay, pushing my dinghy through the mud and shallow water into the main channel of the river and then, not later than 10.53 a.m., for the water would be ebbing fast, I could set off in my boat, moving downward with the tide.

Once every day and once every night our tidal river suffers this sea-change and we accept it as we accept the routine of bath and breakfast and supper time, the succession of days and weeks and years.

Yet the life of our tidal river is nothing less than miraculous, in its response to every prepotent, cosmic summons of the moon, affluent, refluent, with spring tides, neap tides, ebb and flow, diurnal and monthly rhythm through the ages. Ever-changing too

is the beauty of our river, subject to every onslaught or caress of wind, now selfless as a mirror and now self-assertive, broken into foam-flowered corrugations; to-day gentle, yielding in its substance, tomorrow defiant and unconquerable when moon and wind, entering into strange alliance, will force it to unleash boats from moorings, to flood human dwellings, undermine pier foundations and wash away landmarks with a ferocity against which neither precaution of man nor resistance of solid earth can prevail.

Half way down the river, on a shoulder of land that commands the mouth of the Helford and the sea-horizon framed by Dennis Head and Toll Point, stands the old grey farm of Merthen. The records of this five hundred and sixty acre property go back to the age of the Domesday Book.

That shoulder of land, narrowing to a wood full of oak saplings and holly undergrowth, ends in a spear-point dividing the river into two channels, the main branch on the south and the Constantine branch on the north. Embracing this point there is, at high tide, deep water, sometimes blue, sometimes grey or green, amethyst or brown, in response to seasonal cloud and tree reflections. At low tide the scene is completely changed. The river consists now of two narrow streams, one on each side of Groyne Point, flowing many feet below the level of mud flats where sea-birds congregate to feed, to sleep and to preen themselves, curlew, gulls, ducks, herons, redshanks, whimbrel and sanderlings. Their wild music will always ring out on those flats with peculiar resonance. When you sit down on the shore to listen to this music, you do not see the water, for those flats beside either channel are merged into a single waste-land.

About the farm itself there is great space and many of the fields are in permanent pasture. The promontory covered with oaks and hollies is, on the contrary, an enclosed and exclusive kingdom.

To begin with, since the tannin procured from oak bark is no longer largely used in the preparation of leather, the woodland now brings in no revenue and that gives it a certain independence; its values are not now the values of this world. Then also the paths beneath the trees are only meandering cattle tracks, seldom

trodden by human feet. Finally the wood is so dense that when you have penetrated to the middle you may look upward and all round without catching any glimpse of sky or water.

There is, moreover, something else that sets this place apart from ordinary land that you may purchase or inherit, from land that you can measure and value by rod and pole and perch. You have only to enter the wood alone, to stand quietly among the trees and you will be at once aware of this indefinable thing. The wood is not a hostile place, it does not, like the jungle, harbour reptiles although you may sometimes catch sight of an adder in a clearing full of heather near Groyne Point, and it does not, like some dark woods that are gloomy and inauspicious, make you feel that you are an intruder. Yet some inexplicable presence will thrill you into awareness of mystery as you tread softly over the dappled ground on which sunshine and shadow are falling through the leafage. You wonder if the trees are guarding some ancient secret and then you begin to suspect that no mere mortal could ever surprise or arrogate the wisdom that is theirs.

You feel that men may come and men may go and landlords follow one another while the trees are unconcerned by change of ownership; but if indeed they own allegiance to some overlord in the world of things unseen, you cannot guess the nature of that sovereignty. Nor will they betray to you by so much as a murmur of their leaves their own manner of obeisance or their own peculiar form of tribute.

It is best, in visiting this domain of Merthen, to see the woodland promontory last of all, journeying to the place by water, landing at the deserted quay on the main branch of the river and wandering up the valley of the hazel trees. You can then pace about the old grey farm and the fields that surround it and the ancient camp in the midst of those fields until, leaving this grassy upland, you are ready to be enfolded by the coolness, the shade and the mystery of that oak wood.

Often you will recall that journey, moment by moment, living through it again in memory.

When, after landing, you enter the valley of the hazels, there is a green light on either side of your track. A stream trickles

The Helford River.

with faint music beneath a tangle of fern and hemlock. As you move silently up that arcaded path, the leafy soil will muffle every footstep. These hazels, unlike our familiar bushes of coppice and hedgerow, have grown through age-long solitude into trees, they tower up with knotted trunks, they sub-divide, they carry leafage mainly on the summit. In that grove of branches writhing in green shadows there comes over you a sense of the passing of centuries and your own values of to-day and yesterday become lost and after a while you are one with the woodland that will face rain and sunshine and changing seasons through a thousand years with equanimity, never reckoning loss by the death of a giant oak, nor gain by the survival of a sapling, for the wood is a living entity. Standing there in silence you feel that you could play your part as a single nut or a fallen leaf that will make mould, or a branch that tosses greeting to the sky, and it matters not which you are, for the heart-beat of the forest is your own.

The crooning of a pigeon awakes you from that reverie. You move out from the vaulted dimness of the hazel grove and find yourself in a valley filled with sunlight, where once there was an orchard but vegetation now is rampant and elder-blossoms, like pale moons in daylight, are set amid tangled greenery. Time is standing still in that quiet place while one wood-pigeon and another is crooning in the trees and their low tone of contentment is but an echo of your mood. If only time might thus stand still for ever, while those moons of blossoms are gleaming in their greenery and those birds crooning their unreflecting happiness.

The path leads up through the orchard where brambles have grown into mounds and now produce the most luscious blackberries in the countryside, then past a hollow elm where a swarm of bees have made their home, to the copper-beech that stands beside the farm. In summer the tree wears an opaque, maroon-coloured hue but for a few days in the month of May it is transparent rose like the colour of a certain mosslike seaweed floating in a pool. Grey farm buildings cluster behind the house and are adorned with orange lichen; standing in front, outside the granite porch, you look beyond the wood and the river to the sea-horizon cut off sharply on either side by those twin headlands. There is something inexpressibly beautiful about that view. It

seems as if that long horizon where sky and water meet were calling you to sail away to southern seas, to wander on and on until you could overlook the far rim of the universe.

Leaving the farm and facing towards Constantine you pass through two fields before you come to the ancient camp, once a deer-park and long before that possibly a fortress, for "din" is the ancient name for a fortress and the earliest spelling of Merthen is Meredin. Once within the precincts of that camp you must tread softly and hush your thoughts.

Even while using these chill, reminiscent words I can feel that breath from another world as I sit alone on the ancient greensward.

The camp, a double one, is rectangular, guarded by a ditch and a bank; a line of oaks keep watch upon that bank as if they were guardians of a sanctuary. I feel remote from the world as if I had entered a secret place and shut every door behind me. After a while I become conscious of winged life all about me, in and out of the trees, across two grass enclosures, there are birds flying to and fro, missel-thrushes and blackbirds, restless in their flight, but there is neither urgency nor haste in their movements, which seem to express a rhythmical sense of joy. There are grey wings, black wings, brown wings in continual motion. They are more like forms in some ancient tapestry than familiar birds of to-day and the longer I sit and watch them the stronger grows my sense of something unusual in their flight and their mood. That something is elusive as a phrase that will haunt one, even while one searches memory in vain for the forgotten words. Is it a thing that I understood once upon a time, far away in another life, now breaking in on my consciousness with the poignancy of lost things half remembered?

As I sit there gradually the sense of strangeness fades. In another moment I might myself become a sentinel oak with green branches in the sunlight, or a grey-winged bird flitting without haste or fear across those bright spaces. Here is the serenity of a primeval world wherein I hold and keep the essence of each minute. Time once more is standing still, or has it, in truth been moving backward to some golden age when birds possessed their world in freedom, flying here and there without

an enemy? Who can tell? I feel that if I linger in this enchanted place I might be caught and held here for eternity.

As I seek the exit through a gap in the bank and a track across the ditch, my feet sink in the dead leaves of many a past year and I stumble, for I am finding my way back with some uncertainty to the world where time moves on.

Beyond the camp in the direction of Constantine there is a deep valley where herons nested at one time in beeches and firs but except in the nesting season I would usually turn my back on that valley and walk across wide grass fields to the oak wood and Groyne Point. There is something generous about Merthen, with its large fields, wide outlook and land that is prolific not with the responsiveness of virgin soil but with richness enhanced by human toil through many generations. It is a little corner of England where beauty and cultivation may yet dwell together in harmony.

Such thoughts as these always filled my mind as I crossed the fields and then, after climbing through the fence beside the wood, I would leave behind me all remembrance of human beings and human labour.

The oaks close in on me with a silence that is profound. Their grey stems are mottled, some are almost silver, every one is angular so that the wood has a close, tangled aspect, with tree stems intersecting each other and never any straight ones rising directly from the soil towards the sky. This impulsive, untrained growth of the trees and the deep silence reigning among them; the scarcity of living creatures; the dim light that bids defiance to observation of details; all these things help to reinforce my belief that the wood is a kingdom of its own.

Yet now and then, looking over my shoulder after the crackle of some twig underfoot, I am startled into a sense that the wood is not, after all, a kingdom but a spirit, aware of human intrusion, watchful of my movements, even reading my thoughts. I move on quietly and the silence presses in from all sides until I feel it as I might feel the touch of a living person.

In every season this wood harbours strange beauty but perhaps that beauty is most striking in winter, for when the trees are bare their boughs acquire a vital look as if they were writhing in

movement and the grey bark gleams like silver through the brown twigs. Yet come whenever I might, I only renewed my conviction that the wood has never owned and never can own earthly overlordship and that through many generations it has held some secret that may be of greater value than what lies at the rainbow's end.

I had lost myself in all these thoughts and memories of Merthen while I was pushing out my boat from Bishop's Quay and rowing down the river on that particular day of summer when it would be low-tide at 12.53 p.m. The water in the main channel held within its depths the green of forest and the blue of sky, both looking down on it in their superior immobility. Seen from the river the leafy crests of the Merthen oaks were curved like the bosses of shields as they followed the contours of the land, stretching away to Groyne Point with never a gap in their smooth greenness. The wood was inscrutable as ever, there was no sign of life in the tree-tops nor on the rocky margin of the water and I knew that the silence among those trees would be unbroken.

Now rowing and now drifting in my boat I drew opposite the valley of the hazels, to where a little creek receives the brook that comes down from the orchard and dark shadows mark the place where woodland gives way to water. Suddenly I became aware of living creatures in the tree-tops that overlook this creek. Perched on the highest boughs, each one mute as an image or an icicle, they were intently watching the mud and the water and the progress of my boat. There were seven herons watching there, each one a silver streak outlined on green leafage. I rested on my oars and gazed at them, wondering which was more exciting, beauty in quick movement such as the flash of a humming-bird, the breaking of a wave, the bounding of a lamb, or beauty frozen into an attitude. For the moment I wanted nothing but to watch those silver silhouettes in the green leaves but the tide was drifting me slowly down.

Up and down the Helford river there are small colonies of herons' nests in firs and beeches overlooking both the main channel and the smaller ones. In the course of years there have been changes in these nesting-places, changes that human bird-watchers can neither foretell nor explain.

It is a mysterious impulse that will force the birds to leave familiar haunts and settle themselves for an uncertain term of years in hitherto unoccupied trees. Often when this happens there is no visible sign of decay in the deserted trees nor any apparent threat from marauding men. Are the birds incited to this migration by some foreboding or are they subject, as we are, to a restless spirit that every now and then will demand change and movement at any price? The bird-watcher may ask himself these and many other questions on the subject of herons and their nests but seldom will he find an answer. For example, which, among the herons, is king or leader and how does he attain, exercise and preserve that right of choice which leads to the removal of a whole nesting colony into new quarters?

Beside a neighbouring Cornish river there is a heronry which is an irregular chain of single nests, with here and there a couple of nests close together, all spread out along the banks of a three-mile long creek. Two of us were camping once in an oak wood beside that channel and every night after darkness had fallen we would hear raucous sounds overhead and would know that the father bird had come home from heaven knows what foraging or amorous adventure and was communicating with his mate immediately above our tent. We longed to understand his language, to know if he were treating her to a true account of his night wanderings, to learn what had been the nature of his quest and whether he had met with success or failure. But always we would fall asleep with the sound of those harsh, scolding notes in our ears and in our minds a sense of unsolved mystery.

During my years of intimacy with the Helford herons I never found such a straggled heronry as that one, the birds that I saw were always nesting in small colonies of from six to a dozen pairs.

Throughout the years when the Old Landlord could no longer get down to the river to watch the birds, he remained deeply interested in the movements of the herons. Those of us, among his neighbours, who studied bird-life would bring him careful reports of their numbers and of any change in their nesting places. Indeed he was the centre for all the bird news of the district. Once a golden oriole was reported in a sheltered, inaccessible valley not far from the Mansion, but by the time he

had sent his friends to search that valley the golden oriole had passed on. During one very hard winter he received, one after another, little paper bags brought up to him by hand from various people in the district; each bag contained a small black feathered corpse and a note to say where it had been found. He identified them all as stormy petrels; they had been blown inland and had perished in the Cornish lanes.

It was a great day when one of his friends brought him the news that a new heronry had been established near his own boathouse.

Though I had never seen any herons' nests in the trees near Groyne Point I had observed that the wood was a favourite daytime haunt of the birds. On that summer morning as I drifted down past Merthen quay, those seven images came flapping out from their little creek, passed me by and settled one by one in some oak tree on the edge of the shore. Each of those silver-coloured birds then remained erect and still, as if frozen on its perch, and each one was intensely vigilant, watching and listening and behind them the trees, I felt sure, also were watching and listening.

I passed on slowly down the river, landed at Groyne Point, tied the boat to an overhanging branch of an oak and spent a long day among the trees and in the ancient camp and the fields about the farm.

Many hours later, on the return journey, when the sun had set and a squall came lashing the water and darkening earth's colours with a grey pall, I passed up the main channel. The trees of Merthen were no longer still and silent, I had found them off their guard, they were tossing leaves in frenzy, they were whispering to one another, a sibilant murmur was passing through the wood. Was it a sigh, a premonition, or a reminiscent shiver? Were those oak trees telling their own secrets to each other, as bards when they come together may be chanting their ancient mysteries?

A flock of rooks rose from the beech grove below Tremayne Quay, they circled against the darkening sky and then settled again. Darkness drew in from all sides and enfolded Merthen wood. Somewhere within that wood the seven birds were roosting in their kindgom. The seven kings of Merthen.

5

MARIA PENDRAGON

I should hate to think that I had only left that one word-picture of Maria, a picture of her moving to and fro in the water, growing more and more bedraggled in her faded finery, light-hearted as a butterfly, stopping and stooping often to peer into the bottom of her net, silent for the most part, conscious of no higher thought or purpose than catching prawns and cooking them for supper.

For Maria's life was not only regulated by the river in practical ways but it was coloured by the beauty of the river in its ever-changing aspects. Always, for example, in the month of May she and I would arrange to spend a whole long day among her bluebells, looking down on the water below and that is how I like best to picture her, surrounded by all things lovely, keeping still in utter and contented idleness. But whether she were resting among the bluebells, picking mushrooms, gathering blackberries, entertaining friends and strangers from the yachts that came to anchor in the Bosom, feeding fowls and getting flowers ready for market, or organizing moonlight picnics, she was hardly ever out of sight of the tidal river and the oak saplings that were gathered into coppices and great woodlands along its shores. There was always freedom and beauty in her setting.

Maria had never burdened herself with stores of information about any particular subject but she had a fine palate for tasting all experience that came to her either directly or vicariously. I sometimes thought that her special subject was the art of living. Yet she had a certain mental agility which she could use to extricate herself from any awkward situation that arose from her lack of accurate knowledge. She never had been able to register the kind of knowledge that is hammered into us like one nail after another in our school-days; nails like "William-the-Conqueror-1066" and "Two-and-two-make-four" and "Earth-is-a-planet" and "Madrid-is-the-capital-of-Spain." Often I would watch her with amazement as she conversed with one or another

of the learned men who would drift into her home and enjoy her hospitality. Some of these were friends of her intellectual husband or of her highly intelligent offspring, others would arrive from a yacht armed with an introduction, ready to enjoy the company of Maria and Kimiel, the food, the hot baths and the welcome of a solid home. Often, as I listened, I would wonder if we were not, all we ordinary people, encased in our equipment of facts as the crocodile is encased for life in his scales. Do we really need this burden of scale-like facts? Maria could shine without it.

Quite apart from shining, Maria had another gift; her sympathies were wide as this world of ours. As for most of us, the plain, unvarnished specimens of humanity, we need to have the evidence of our senses before our sympathy can be roused into action, or at least we need to hear some individual, first-hand tale of woe, but Maria could be troubled to the depth of her being on second-hand or even third-hand evidence, at the summons of a rumour, a paragraph, a casual word or two. It never seemed to matter that she was not very clear about the relative position of the East and the West Indies nor the exact location of Timbuctoo, for she could picture vividly all the sorrows of the world and more than once I have found her nearly weeping over some massacre in China or the torturing of a local cat.

Nor was her sympathy confined to idle tears. No homeless, sick or troubled person ever came to her in vain, she would help them for days or months, or years if need be, with that strange mixture of compassion and common-sense which was so characteristic of her. In her own talk she held to no logical nor even consecutive thread but on the other hand she was the world's best listener. Shut away in her woodland home on the Helford river, Maria Pendragon, always open-minded and open-hearted, was a true citizen of the world.

One scene in particular remains vivid and isolated in my mind, as if it were a stretch of country lit up for a second by summer lightning. It was in the Pendragon dining-room and I was one of eleven people.

I had rowed down with the tide from the upper reaches on the far side of the river; had tripped off my dinghy in that crescent

bay where the swans will gather every winter, making a frieze of white forms outlined on green seaweed; had climbed up through the wood, enjoyed tea and a rambling talk with Maria and now the others had assembled and we all sat down to supper.

Three walls of the long and narrow room were lined with books, the fourth held windows level with the tree-tops and at the far end were a pair of elephant tusks brought home by Kimiel from Africa and now set upright on a table. On the beams overhead were fixed a couple of racing oars and above the beams one could see the thatch of the roof. Kimiel sat at the head of the table with young people on either side. He was one of those rare men who, while gifted with a first-class brain, had the power of making the most ordinary of us feel more intelligent than usual when we were talking or listening to him. He would always treat a school-boy as if he were a grown man with experience behind him, even while he himself was imparting information which that boy would never forget. This alliance of gifts and powers was only half concealed by an extremely breezy, hearty manner, and wherever he went the young would follow him.

The Pendragon brood and a couple of cousins had just come in from their boats and they sat down to supper in pilot jackets or roll-neck jerseys but Maria, in honour of the Dutchman and the Lama who were sitting on each side of her, was wearing a semi-evening dress. It was dark blue velvet that gathered and held a shadow in every fold. She was wearing also two diamond brooches and an extra string of pearls. The Lama did not hail from Tibet, he was a perfectly sound Englishman but I never heard him called by any other name; he was a middle-aged friend of the whole family, a man who had acquired in his eastern wanderings not only a facial skin like yellow parchment but also much quiet wisdom. The Dutchman was a stranger, brought in by the eldest Pendragon son from a vessel that was anchored in the roadstead outside the Bosom.

Once the soup spoons were in action Maria set herself to play the cosmopolitan hostess and assuming her most winsome smile addressed the stranger.

"I've never visited your delightful country," she said, "but I had a favourite school-friend who came from your most lovely

city and she would often talk to me about the beauty of Brussels."

The Dutchman held his spoon paralysed in mid-air and the silence was so heavy that it seemed to awaken echoes down one side of the table and up the other. Then he bowed ever so slightly towards his hostess, or perhaps towards his soup.

"Er—" he said, "er—I think I ought to remind you. Brussels does not belong to us. Amsterdam is our capital. Perhaps you know Amsterdam?" he asked, trying to force a smile into his wooden features.

"Of course, of course," she said with a rippling laugh. "How could I make such a slip of the tongue?"

The Dutchman went on manfully with the conversation.

"Perhaps you know Haarlem and Delft and the Hague?" he suggested. "They are very beautiful."

"No," replied Maria wistfully, with her head a little on one side. "I've heard of them, naturally, but I fear I've never had the good fortune to see all those grand old German towns."

There was a dead silence that seemed to hum quietly in our ears and then to grow louder and louder like a zooming plane. The plane seemed to be nearly overhead when the Lama broke its spell with a low chuckle. This was a signal for the break-up of the general solemnity, the young Pendragons breaking into a roar of laughter and Kimiel smiling like a benign Buddha. The Dutchman was swept along in the current of universal mirth.

Maria serenely threw down the subject of continental towns, as if it were a card that is played and addressed herself to telling the foreigner about the beauties of the Helford. She had recovered all her ground in less than two minutes and her listener remained spellbound.

In the hours round about midnight I rowed home from that supper-party, following in my boat the silver line that was the middle of the river. I was enfolded on either side by outer darkness, the black woods towering above me, the black water lapping up to the edge of my silver pathway. Neither by night nor day could the reflections of those trees, that were cast into the river from either side, meet each other in the water, were the channel never so wide or never so narrow.

It was not only in the summer time that Maria and I spent

happy days on or beside the river. The Helford dominated that little world in which, all the year round, our friendship was enclosed. To begin with it was our nearest, although not our easiest, means of access to each others' homes. Since she was always something of a stay-at-home the journey usually fell to my lot but seldom did I succumb to taking the easy way round by car. A day begun and ended with a river journey could never be an ordinary day and I know now that the glamour with which those meetings are associated in my mind is not merely the glamour that memory may shed around an irrecoverable past.

There was always a lightness and brightness about time spent on the river. Rowing down was a happy adventure, fraught sometimes with difficulty and excitement for one always had to outwit the tide, or rather to enlist its help, and sometimes one had to battle against an east wind coming up the channel or a side wind blowing across from one bank to the other. Once I got stuck on a mud bank in the main river on a falling tide and had to sit in my boat for four hours until she would float again. Rowing home was often exciting when darkness would be gathering or gathered round me and there would be queer lights and shadows and bird-calls sounding, as bird-calls always do in darkness, as if they were voices from another world.

Yes, the river was always with us like a living presence, whether we were wading in it with our nets or cruising on it in our boats or taking picnic meals to spend an idle day beside it in field or wood or on some ancient disused quay. We could never tire of its moods, for it had the quality which, in human beings, we describe as "charm." Yet beneath the ever-changing colour, the unceasing movement, the quivering changes in each reflection of some solid form, we could always sense the stability of a being that, through all the centuries, was keeping tryst with the call of the moon.

Indeed, the lives of the whole Pendragon family were determined and coloured by the river; not only in its early course, with narrow channel, mud shores and slowly widening estuary, but also in its later, fuller form when it led them out between Toll Point and Dennis Head to open sea, out to those toothed and cruel rocks the Manacles; out to the harbour of Falmouth and

to that fair and stately headland where Zoze Point marks the end of St. Anthony-in-Roseland; and finally to the open English Channel which is fairway for the great ships of world traffic. Whenever they were at home all their daily activities would be shaped by the sea, their thoughts would dwell on winds and tides and currents, their talk would be mainly about mast and sail. A day inland was, for them, a day wasted. They must always have a beach or a deck beneath their feet, always be sailing, rowing, fishing, building boats, mending boats, designing boats, or writing about ships and sailors and the sea.

As a family they held very closely together and although each one of them had many personal friends they seldom made a move, physically, to go out and meet those friends. Always an outsider had to penetrate his way into the family circle but, once inside, his welcome from all would be cordial and complete.

In such fashion did the river shape the lives of those young Pendragons but as for the way it coloured their personalities, that is a process not easily described. Perhaps what they gained from the river and the sea was not a colour at all but a quality, an aura, only discernible by those who received the same vibrations; yet, like a colour, that quality would change and shimmer under different aspects and would always defy one's touch or definition.

One may sense this quality now and again in a man who has lived long in harmony with his surroundings. Nearly all of us have observed at one time or another a strange far-seeing look in the eyes of a sailor and then have said to ourselves that it was, no doubt, a look acquired by the habit of peering towards distant horizons at sea; yet actually the sailor's habitual vision is often not only far outward but also deep inward. He has felt, with the intimacy of physical touch, the power of the sea and the loneliness of man, he has lived closely with the far-off stars that not one of us may hold nor touch, with the waves that no man may stay nor diminish. Things beyond human sight and control, depths of the sea and power of the wind have been his abiding companions.

That look in a sailor's eyes has become almost proverbial and is recognized even by those apt to observe in terms of this and that but never the other; apt to register a contrast but never an essence; alive to black and white, strong and weak, loud

and soft, but never to the still small whisper, never to the Something-More which is the poet's will-o'-the-wisp.

Always such a one will look at a sailor and remark: "Yes, crowsfeet round the eyes. He got them from wrinkling his eyes in the tropics to look for a ship coming up over the edge of the sea."

In olden days there were men of other callings who, through a deep, unconscious harmony with their surroundings, achieved that same indescribable poised awareness of the unseen. There were the shepherd, the hermit, the tiller of the soil, the charcoal-burner, people who all through life had known the sky, grass, stones, wind, trees and sunshine as day-long or even night-long companions and in that companionship had acquired a spirit of acceptance that is rare in man. So often do we cry out or strive against destiny, but these men, like flowers, would betray no fretfulness in their living or their dying. Whether they were burning wood for ashes, turning soil for seed, binding sheaves for harvest, tending flocks or musing on the origin and fate of mankind, they would accept their lot and perform their task as "the stars perform their shining and the sea its long moon-silver'd roll," achieving a rhythm, a quality, a colour in their lives which no machine can acquire or imitate.

I do not suggest that the young Pendragons shone with joy or acquired rolling attitudes but how they did adore their sailing boats and how they did dislike engines! Nor am I suggesting that they bore about with them the insignia of poise and serenity for any stranger to see. Their navy serge trousers were usually stained, their jerseys were often frayed and their hair was always blown awry. On a casual meeting they would appear to be ordinary young men, only perhaps a little withdrawn in their manner, as if they had their own pleasant thoughts to satisfy them.

Yet now and then that crust of reserve would break and some slight word or action that was in truth symbolic would betray that passion for the sea which coloured their whole existence.

Once the youngest gave me two grey mullet that he had caught in his rainbow-coloured net. It is sober truth to say that those fishes, eaten fresh from the water, had a tang like that of the starlit air that was about him when he was setting the net, like

the cold breath of dawn that came up the river and played about him as he was pulling in the rainbow hand over hand. Once the eldest brother lent me Hilaire Belloc's *Hills and the Sea* and that was a memorable day in my life. And the tough one of the family, having occasion to write to a friend of mine about certain matters connected with the ownership of the Helford beaches, said at the end of his letter: "I am not a religious person but if I were I should say that the Helford shores are holy ground."

Meanwhile I have deserted Maria and the bluebells and we must return to a certain day of spring which we had planned to spend in their company. I can see her now, emerging from her room after I had been champing with impatience for half an hour; she was dressed for the occasion, or so she thought. Personally I like to wear my oldest clothes for such a day because they are the most comfortable, nor had I forgotten that the way to the bluebells was pathless and beset with brambles. Maria was fully equipped in a crepe-de-chine dress and silk stockings, with something on her head that was rather like one of the old Victorian picture hats and yet looked extremely smart. Nylons had not at that time taken the world by storm.

I knew that mine would be the role of attendant slave, averting each bramble from her ankles during our progress towards that particular part of the wood where bluebells were in sole possession, where we could lie at ease in a silence so deep that one could almost overhear them ringing their fragile bells.

It would be wrong to wax lyrical about bluebells. One's silly words have no right of entry to their presence. There is only one tribute payable to their scent, their colour, their remoteness from our flesh and blood, and that tribute is silence. This much may, however, be said about the actual setting of those bluebells in the woodland above the Helford river; that setting is completely wild. There has never been a roadway, gate or fence set near them with the puny gesture of one who desires to contain and possess the beauty of the world. I never heard the Pendragons speak about the wildness or tameness of human surroundings but they knew instinctively that a certain measure of wildness there must be in a sane man's daily life and this they had carefully preserved in the approaches to their own home.

In town or country or suburb a touch of this wildness is vital as daily bread. An unfenced common outside the gate of home; a hill or mountain or the sea on the horizon; or even, in the back garden, one branch of a tree that will sway with unforeseen movements as it responds to every assault or whisper of the wind; any of these may be enough for the satisfaction of that human spirit which, encased in its bodily form and the daily round, demands some contact with nature's freedom.

The Pendragons indeed had well and truly preserved the freedom of nature in their own home. Their one approach by land was a cart-track filled with ruts and pot-holes and punctuated by seven gates, while yachtsmen had access to the house by an earthen path that wound up through the oak woods. It was this pathway that we followed as we left the house and set out for the bluebells; but very soon we had to plunge into trackless undergrowth, I going ahead and performing my task with the brambles while we advanced further and further into that labyrinthine world of twisted tree-stems that were now enclosing us on every side. The oaks were hardly more than saplings, twenty to thirty feet in height, with writhing silver stems about as thick as a man's arm. Never yet had I seen that wood other than beautiful, although sometimes it was withdrawn and sometimes brooding or even austere; indeed it was changeful in mood as the wind is and the weather is, and then it suffers also the seasonal changes to which all growing things are subject.

On one occasion when we were walking among those trees together Maria had suddenly exclaimed: "The wood is stupid to-day." I had looked at her in surprise, ready to be indignant, but then it suddenly flashed across me that she was expressing not criticism but sensitive response. She was feeling, as I always felt, that it was like a living human being.

Here and there among the oaks are hollies, single trees or several in a group. We came round one such group to find ourselves in the presence of the bluebells.

They were there in their thousands, with upright stems and ever-bending heads and ever-swinging bells. There were a million forms but the sheen of them was like one colour in the sky; and the beauty of them was like a trumpet note that may

shatter a man's straying thoughts and leave him with a single pin-point of consciousness.

Yet the beauty of those bluebells was also like a whisper and what it said was this:

"Be still, O restless soul, and you may learn the one great secret."

6

GHOST AT THE OLD FORD

The river has ugly moods and cruel ones. It is not only a fairway for ships, a setting for pleasure-parties, a refuge for wading birds and a place of meditation for the solitary. It can be threatening, dangerous, even fatal, as it proved to be for a certain old mender of roads when he took a chance on one dark night of winter. The tide will wait on no man and William-John Ivey should have remembered his school history book and the tale of King Canute.

The Old Landlord would often speak of the ancient ford, a place where, according to local legend, a man could cross the river on horseback at low water, some eighty or a hundred years ago. Once, at the very spot which he had described to me, I waded out at dead low tide as far as the middle of the narrow channel and there I stood on the hard bottom in about a foot of water, facing the mud bank on the other shore and afraid to climb it. The ford is never used to-day, although the old men love to talk about it still, relating tales of those who rode home that way, some of them sober and other market-merry, crossing on horseback from one muddy shore to the other. Whether it ever really did exist as a recognized passage I cannot tell. The whole thing may just as well have been an old man's fancy, some tale for telling "between the lights."

As for William-John Ivey and Mrs. Lamley, did they ever really meet in that strange fashion or was her own part in that encounter due to an attack of indigestion? Indeed I cannot say. How the Cornishman does long, when he lives in the tropics, for one good day of the soft west-country rain. We, in our twentieth century climate of incandescent publicity, are sometimes truly thankful for the survival of a little mystery. I can only relate the story as I heard it.

Why it should have been a "foreigner" and not one of ourselves who was summoned by the ghost of that old man to search for his body by the ancient ford, no one ever could explain. It is

hardly likely that his thoughts should have turned to Mrs. Lamley in those last moments when he was struggling with mud and water. Yet things do happen like that sometimes, things past all believing, and when they happen so there is nothing more to be said.

Did we not travel six hundred miles through the Arctic solitudes and see only a single caribou, standing on the muskeg at dawn between our two camp beds, while we peered at him for a fleeting moment through our mosquito-bars? And then, after we had boarded the tourist steamer at the Fort, did we not hear that caribou had been seen in their thousands by those sedentary tourists who rested on the deck of the S.S. *Yukon*? Did not Saul go seeking the asses of his father Kish and return home with a kingdom? And did not Little Claus begin the story with his single horse while Big Claus had four, and did he not end it with a whole herd of cattle after throwing Big Claus in a sack to the bottom of the river? It is a strange world, my masters.

So here, in all its strangeness, is the ghost story of the old ford, of Mrs. Lamley reigning in the ancient home of the Menhinnicks and of William-John Ivey, stone-breaker in his youth, trimmer of hedges in his middle-age and, at the time of the tragedy that befell him, the spryest septuagenarian in Churchtown.

The strangest thing in the story is, of course, the fact that Mrs. Lamley was a "foreigner." Yet even that fact is not the beginning of the story, we must go further back in order to explain the extreme novelty of Mrs. Lamley in her surroundings and in the eyes of her neighbours, a novelty which was, in such conditions, almost criminal. We must go back to the history of the Menhinnick family who had owned and inhabited the Manor for two hundred and fifty years. They were the family in whose honour this ditty had long ago been written:

Sometimes they sings, sometimes they prays,
Sometimes they worship God ;
But on the night in question
They stole a head of cod.

Throughout the ages the Menhinnick family had produced not only men of piety but also men of wit and men of wisdom, and

nearly all those ancestral figures were men of valour in their own circle, if not of actual renown in national affairs, while some at any rate, as it would appear from the ancient rhyme, were common or garden rogues. Among all these, however, never a single one had come back from the other world to disturb the peace of his descendants, nor was there ever a ghostly presence within the Manor until the reign of Mrs. Lamley.

When the last of the Menhinnicks lay dying they had discussed the situation in the "Seven Bells."

"Squire's a-sinkin," reported Joe, the gardener. "He's took weth information of the kittens an ulsters."

"Yes, shure nuff," chimed in Ernie Borgwitha, the smith, "Doctor he come up my place this mornin to give the wife a bottle of physic like, an 'e sez to me 'e sez, 'Squire's fine and waik an 'e may slip through our hands any minnut.' That's what Doctor sez."

"The old Manor wean't be itself weth no Menhinnick living theare," added Chuggy Pill. "I mind me granfaather tellin me theare was Menhinnicks livin up Menhinnick ever since the days of Solomon, and *he* was a wise man ef ever theare was one."

Chuggy, being the only bachelor in the bar parlour, looked around him with a fighting air, as if he were waiting for some one to challenge this speech and then, after a long silence, he said:

"Mind you, I doan't knaw as I hold weth Solomon havin all they conkerbines. Simmen to me one wife's is more'n enough for any plain man."

"Tes a whisht job, that's av it," said the landlord, who seldom spoke except to pour oil on troubled waters, which manoeuvre always took the form of echoing the majority opinion in any discussion. He spread both thumbs sideways in a deprecating gesture of finality and then poured himself out another pint. "Theare ded always *belong* to be Menhinnicks livin up Menhinnick," he added in an aggrieved voice, as if he resented the action of Providence in planning to remove such an essential landmark from the local world.

Within the week Squire was dead and buried and within the year that ancient Manor was put up to auction. Mrs. Lamley bought it and no one had ever heard of Mrs. Lamley, who was

supposed to have come from Yorkshire, and on the day when she arrived to take possession there was the most severe thunderstorm that had taken place in the district within the memory of living man.

"Foreboding oal weather I do call it," Joe had said in the morning, "like-as-if somethin terrible was going to come."

And his saying was always remembered.

However, nothing terrible did happen, only Mrs. Lamley settled in without delay and began to work the Home Farm herself, like any bailiff, despite the fact that she was up in years and weighed close on nine-score. Joe and the others eyed her proceedings darkly.

"She've got a passel o new-fangled notions that no one ever heerd tell on avore," he announced one evening. And the others all nodded their heads in assent and added in a chorus: "She doan't belong to we."

Ernie Borgwitha added his quota: "She wean't come to no good, mark my words, boys." And all the boys of fifty and sixty and seventy years nodded their heads in solemn assent and Chuggy Pill declared that "Menhennick doan't belong to have foreigners messin' around," and the landlord, seeing no cause for intervention in such general harmony, poured himself another pint. And Mrs. Lamley continued to put into practice her belief in mass production and labour-saving machines.

After fifteen years she was still a "foreigner" to all her neighbours, for all unknown to herself those "new-fangled" notions, which were really nothing more than the basic ideas of her everyday life, had been like a veil or screen between herself and the people and their country. She remained unaware of the real Cornwall. She knew nothing of the magic that hid in the very boulders rooted on the moorland and the hills, she had never explored those hidden valleys where blackthorn, silvered over with lichen, grows awry in fantastic forms, she had learned nothing of the secrets guarded by headlands that have looked down on scenes of wreckage and lost mariners. Even the ancient Manor would always hide its memories from her.

From the first moment of her arrival she trod heavily about her new little world in Cornwall, setting down her feet in four-

square fashion and putting full weight on each, nor did she ever allow herself to suspect that there were deeper things in Cornish minds and Cornish memories than she could fathom. She never won understanding of the thoughts of those about her and whenever one of her men would speak of "what we belong to do" or "what we don't belong to do," or would quote some cryptic saying of the "old ancient ones," a saying born of their perennial, racial wisdom, she would brush their words aside quickly as if they had been a cobweb in her path.

Then at last there came a summons, a message, a whisper, call it what you will, from the unknown, a something that Mrs. Lamley, for all her nine-score weight and her material preoccupations, could not entirely ignore.

She went to bed one night at her accustomed hour after a full day that had been occupied, like all her other days, with things that she could touch and see. In spite of all her drive and determination in matters concerning crops and tractors, pedigree herds, improvement of stock and such-like things, Mrs. Lamley was, in her own home, crassly self-indulgent. Her rooms were overheated, her table was overladen with out-of-season foods, her indoor staff had been trained to minister in silence to her comfort as if they were automatons; between the enjoyment of hard work and the indulgence in every luxury that money and thought could supply, she passed through her days and weeks and years with never any pause for reverie. Even in her childhood, so she would often assure her friends and acquaintances, she never had indulged in day-dreams nor wasted time in building castles in Spain and now, in middle age, it was too late for her to enter the world of imagination. She had probably never even heard of Robert Browning and it never would have occurred to her, even under the experience of a ghostly encounter, to "greet the unseen with a cheer." To everything that she met in her pathway she would give due attention, but hitherto only the tangible things had appeared in that self-appointed and carefully regulated course.

On a certain evening she had dined on turtle soup and oysters, the oysters having been brought up the river from Porth Navas by special messenger; roast chicken had followed and then peach

trifle, after which, having sipped her coffee and cherry brandy, she had read a detective story for half an hour. Then she went upstairs to bed, taking with her for perusal in the early morning the current number of *Farmer and Stock-breeder*. She got into her four-poster and settled down in the feather tye and then put out the light but she could not get to sleep. This was a most unusual occurrence. She always professed a certain contempt for people who complained of sleeping badly. She tossed and turned and shifted the pillows and when at last she lay still and began to feel a drowsy calm stealing over her, she became aware of an old man sitting on the foot of her bed.

He had a long white beard, his hat was pulled down a little over his eyes and all his clothes were dripping. His face was strange to her. Although her blinds were down and her shutters closed she could see him as plainly as if there were daylight in the room.

She guessed at first that it was one of those queer village people playing a trick on her and she began to tell the unwelcome visitor, in very plain terms, what she thought of him. She had always looked upon the Cornish folk as strange and unaccountable, nor had she made any secret of this opinion. The old man never moved. Then she sat up in bed and made a pass at him with one hand to push him off.

Whenever she told the tale she would repeat that gesture with her enormous arm and as a matter of fact it was a gesture better fitted to fell an ox than to test the substance of a ghost. She made this movement just as if she were boxing some one's ears and then, so she always declared, both hand and arm to her surprise went right through the old man as if he were smoke.

She then turned on her light but she could not see the intruder, so she got up and searched every corner of the room. She could find nothing unusual anywhere so she returned to bed and put out the light and immediately he appeared again, sitting on the foot of her bed, his hat still pulled down over his eyes and water dripping on to his beard. She turned on the light again, and again she made a thorough search of the room and after repeating this a third time, and then reading for an hour or so, she put out her light and tried to sleep. But all night long her rest was very

broken and every time that she opened her eyes in the darkness she saw the old man sitting on her bed as clearly as if the sun were shining into her shuttered room.

At this point it is fitting that Joe Trebolsue should continue the story, since he took the most active part in the rest of the proceedings.

The cottage of the Trebolsues, with its thatched roof and white-washed walls, was a solitary building some half a mile below Churchtown, standing beside a stream that flowed into a small creek of the river, in a deserted hollow of the land. This cottage was the nearest human dwelling to that point where the creek joined the main channel and that channel was now partly silted up with mud washed down from the high country where once upon a time there had been tin mines at work, where now granite quarrying was the occupation of the people. At low tide the channel here became very narrow and it was at this point that, according to the legend, horsemen used to cross the river. One or two people declared that it was still fordable at that particular spot but no one living had tried it.

"Twas atween the lights ef you take my meaning," Joe would always begin, "twadden dark an twadden yet light when I was waked up by a whisht lil oal sound outside the door, like the tappin of a yaffle an the screechin of a whitneck all to once. So I took me life-preserver, what me faather always took when poachin of a night an his faather took avore him. Granfaather always used to say it was better for company than any musket, an he cud a laid out David an Goliath weth one blow ef he'd a mind to. Howsomever there's a mort o power in a leaden knob an the whale-bone is suent like when goin through the air. No, I caan't say as how I ever used it meself on any person but many's the time of a dark night when I wud pass me hand under the pillow to feel it an I'd say to the wife: 'H'em theare all right. Doan't ee be afeard me dearr.' Women is always nervous creatures at night. Well, I took up me life-preserver as I was sayin an put on me clothes an went down over stairs and theare was a lil boy knockin on the door an cryin. 'Granfer's down in the water,' he sez. 'He cudden get his legs out.' Twas pore Kezia's boy from across the river and simmen like the old man was late comin

home from town, market-merry I spawse, an he thot he wud cross the ford where the old-ancient ones belonged to ride over an he sent the boy ahead to try the mud like an the lil nipper he got over, light as a sparrer, but Granfer Ivey when he got halfways across hisself the mud caught him an he went under. The boy he got frighted an he come up over the fields to look for we."

There was always a pause here, as there should be in a good narrative when one approaches the crisis, a pause for appreciatively chewing the cud of facts delivered, for refilling glasses and for anticipation of what is to come. Then Joe continued:

"A-course I went up an told the wife what had happened an said to her to bide in the bed an not be afeard o nothin while I was gone, an then I went to the Manor an knocked up the maidens an sent in word to the Mistress what had happened and then she sends out her orders. 'Tell Joe,' she sez, 'to get out the boat to once an all the men an drag the river an I'll be down theare beside ee in a few minnuts.' O course I knawed better'n that. The Mistress never was one for early risin nor yet for doin wethout her mait. Ef the laast trump was to sound in her crowst-time she'd finish her bite I reckon before she answered up. Anyways we went down to the ford an we dragged the river forth and back, me an Chuggie an Ernie an haalf a dozen more. The tide was maakin an you cudden see no channel, for the water was lickin up they mud flats till it came in close under the oak trees on one side an the other.

"We dedden catch up nawthen but crabs an oyster-shells an sea-weed. An then aafter a brae while we heerd the car hootin an theare it was a-tearin down the lane an the Missus she come down over the rocks to we an stood on the edge of the water in er great rubber boots an started givin orders. She's a rare hand for givin orders an sharp's the word for all when she do spaik, we do all knaw that. An just at that very moment Chuggy he sez to me: 'Joe,' he sez, 'we've catched un, heave un in boy!' We all heaved together an up come Granfer Ivey. His legs was doubled under him but he was setting up like-as-ef he was livin, weth his hat on his head an the water drippin from it onto his white beard. An he an the Mistress were glaazin pon one nother

like, just as ef they was long-lost brothers but they dedden spaik nary a word, neether one o them."

I believe that Joe's story was told and retold scores of times in the "Seven Bells," whenever there was a stranger there to listen or when the regular clients were in the mood for another rendering of the well-known tale. Many a time have I heard it from his own lips while I sat on his garden wall and he stood beside his cabbages, leaning on his spade. Yet I never heard Joe himself make any reference to that apparition in Mrs. Lamley's bedroom, although the story of the ghost soon got around and was circulated freely in the district, sometimes just as I have told it and sometimes with embellishments added by the narrator. And I never heard Mrs. Lamley's version from her own lips until one winter evening when I was dining at Menhinnick together with several neighbours who were occupied in farming or in market gardening.

We were all feeling overfed and sleepy as we sat round the fire after dinner. We were drinking crême-de-menthe and our hostess kept passing round a large box of marrons glacés. Presently she lit a cigar and, in order no doubt to relieve the silence and enliven the company, she told the ghost story, very much as I have told it as regards the part of it that concerned her own two visions of the drowned man.

Throughout the telling of her story I was tingling with queer, creepy feelings. I could almost see that old man in the room with us, could almost hear the sound of water dripping from his clothes as I peered beneath the hat, trying to see those shaded eyes; and then I forgot the narrator and I was listening with Joe to that knocking on the door and to the crying of that little boy in the middle of the night. Our hostess related it all in the same matter-of-fact tone that she had used during dinner for discussing the weight of sows and the rival merits of two local vets.

When she had finished the story we all remained sitting round in silence. It is not easy for us Cornish folk to comment on such things in the presence of an outsider and we sat about her, a dumb half-circle of guests, applying ourselves with renewed vigour to her liqueurs and sweets. Yet it was clear that she expected applause or questions or perhaps a *quid pro quo* in the

form of our own ghost stories. She had done her best to entertain us; now it was our turn.

"Tell me something amusing," she said, as she lay back among her cushions and puffed out a coil of smoke.

Then I understood how superb was Mrs. Lamley's equipment for the life that she led, concerned only with pigs and turnips, broccoli and tractors and the money they could bring her and the comforts that money could buy. She was encased in a kind of plate armour that protected her from any echo, whisper or reflection from the spirit world. The supernatural might come knocking at her door but it would be in vain. The death of that old man and his strangely-timed appearance in her room had meant nothing more to her than the breaking of a night's good rest and was now become a mere tale for the entertaining of dull and silent people like ourselves.

Yet one thing I shall never understand.

Why, among all the living souls in and around Menhinnick, should this unimaginative woman have been the chosen one when the drowned man's ghost came up from that engulfing mud to pay on earth his farewell visit?

7

CONCERNING TREES

Among the oaks and hollies that line the northern side of the Helford, the majority are saplings, self-renewed and overcrowded. The shores are wooded from Bonallack through Merthen down to Groyne Point and thence to Polpenwith and again on the Calamansac slopes that guard Abraham's Bosom. On the south side there is less woodland and more permanent pasturage fringing the salt water but there are small woods overlooking Tremayne boathouse and the three creeks, Ponsantuel, Vellan Tremayne and Frenchman's Pill.

In these smaller woods one may find among the oaks and hollies many other trees; there are certain ancient beeches with silver trunks and moss-grown silver toes that grasp the earth firmly like anchors mooring a ship; whole groves of hazels that are like forest trees in their girth and height; and some few Scotch firs that have the dignity of sentinels.

Set back a mile or two from the river were many acres of woodland owned by the Old Landlord. He was generous to certain of his neighbours who wished to wander in those woods, giving them permission to do so at all times and seasons but choosing instinctively, for such privilege, those who had the quality of reverence. Even in his day that quality was becoming rare. His ilex avenue, planted about a hundred and fifty years ago, was famous not only in the district but also in the whole county. It was an avenue once seen never forgotten. I have walked there on a night of winter when a great storm was raging and in each gutter of the drive there was a furious little river running and the boughs were tossing overhead, hurling themselves about in a bacchanalian frenzy of response to the onslaughts of the wind. I have seen it also calm as a building of stone, beneath a harvest moon and have glimpsed through those twisted tree-stems the golden stooks of the cornfield outside and noted how tree after

tree was jet black on the shady side and lit to gold where moonbeams played on bark and leafage.

The people of the village would not, on any account whatsoever, walk up that avenue after nightfall and indeed it could be a dark and gloomy place. Personally I never felt that it was haunted or unfriendly, though on a moonless, starless night I have sometimes walked down it or up it feeling grateful to the glowing end of my cigarette for its company.

But then I am one of those who always feel that they could turn and live with trees, just as Walt Whitman felt that he could turn and live with animals because not one of them was demented with the mania of owning things, not one would ever kneel to another and never a one in the whole world was respectable or unhappy. Certainly some of the trees in the Helford district have for many years been more important to me than my human neighbours. They change in appearance, it is true, with the changing of the seasons but I had only to stand in silence beside one of my own friendly trees and put my hand on the bark to establish communication and feel that it stood for truth and steadfastness in its own particular time and place.

I never, of course, paid rates and taxes on that land where my "own" friendly trees grew nor did anyone suspect that I felt a sense of ownership whenever I saw them. Had my lot been cast in London I should, no doubt, have found such friends in Hyde Park and Regent's Park; since I lived in the Helford district I naturally found them on the property of the Old Landlord and other local landowners.

Whenever in my travels I came back to woodland country after being in open moorland or on downs, I would experience a quick uprush of feeling, an indescribable sensation of comfort. "These are my own people," I would say to myself, standing with trees all round me and speaking low lest any human ear should be listening. "My own people." Yes; the beings whose silence is always full of understanding, whose dignity is integral and not assumed. They make no promises but you can rely on their uprightness. They do not come half way to meet you but you always find them waiting with unchanged loyalties. As for age and the changes wrought by age, the trees that I love best never

Ilex Avenue, Trelowarren

seem to grow older; they were of great stature when I first knew them and I shall be gone home again, I hope, before they fall.

Once I had been for six whole days walking on the Dorsetshire downs in a mood of supreme happiness, looking down from that roof of the world on half of the Midland counties. Day after day I had followed the great curves and humps and hollows in that succession of green whale-backs formed from earth and flint and grass, feeling all the delight of an explorer in his strange new world. But I had been a stranger in that world and had been filled, subconsciously, with the particular ecstasy that may be induced by coldness, renunciation, the tang of a north-east wind, a plunge into icy water. All this I only realized after I had left the downs and turned into that great horse-shoe shaped valley filled on three sides with woodland, which stands above the village of Milton Abbas.

I found myself among trees again and there was a sudden sense of almost physical warmth enfolding me, yet it was also like the warmth of a human welcome.

I went on and on, following the green cart-track through the wood and winding slowly downward. It was October and many leaves were fallen from the trees and I shuffled my feet noisily through the dry leaves, choosing to walk in the deeper drifts piled up at the side of the track. It was like hearing music to listen to those leaves brushing against each other. There were patriarchal beeches on either side, great trees with massive trunks spreading into branches only a few feet above the ground. Every one of them was beautiful and friendly. I sat down beneath one of the patriarchs, feeling as if I had come home from a foreign land to all that I loved best. "Yes, this is home," I said to myself and the trees, and I leaned back with intense relief against the great silver stem.

The trees on the shores of the Helford, like trees everywhere else, have two great qualities, they have dignity and the habit of silence.

How could a tree be other than dignified since it stands always in an attitude of reaching to the sky? We could perhaps learn everything that is worth learning in this our human life from the perennial attitude of trees, for each one of them, while rooted by destiny in earth, is cognizant of heaven.

There is also death to be reckoned with and old age and decay. Never, under these stresses, have I seen a tree other than dignified. All over England we may find skeleton oaks of a great age, permanently leafless now but still dignified and standing four-square to whatever winds may blow; we may find one in some neglected woodland where its presence is known only to the inhabitants of the district; or another preserved by public bodies at some cross-roads of a tourist-haunted forest; or another, treasured and labelled, standing on some village green. Even the splintered stumps that are seen in a gale have no look of shabbiness and despair, while those fallen trees that carried half their roots with them when they fell will, in many cases, draw nourishment from the earth for many years, continuing to put forth new shoots that turn always to the light.

As for sudden death at the hands of man, there are two scenes carved sharply on my memory and in neither was there any loss of dignity.

The first was enacted in Vancouver Island, on the shores of Great Central Lake. We had been taken out in a little gas boat to a position a few hundred yards from the shore in order to have a good view of the felling of some trees. We were so fascinated by the precision of the axe work as we watched two men attacking one tree that we hardly gave a thought to the imminent death of that particular tall and very graceful redwood. Every stroke of the axes sent out an echo over the still water. The sound of those echoes was terrific and our suspense became almost unbearable. At last there came a moment of silence and we saw that the two men with the axes moved away from the tree and stood still, leaning on their weapons. Then—there was no sudden crash but I could almost swear that I saw the tree, with one deliberately graceful movement, step forward from its own trunk and remain poised in mid-air, erect as ever, for one split second, in a last good-bye salute to life and beauty. Then it fell, crash!, with its whole length reaching down to the water's edge.

Never had I felt so completely sure that a tree is an imprisoned spirit, facing its cycle of life and death with equanimity.

In order to describe the second scene I must telescope the years, for it took place at a period considerably later than that of

Abraham's Bosom.

all these other small adventures, a period that followed the death of the Old Landlord during the first part of the war. It happened in one of his woods where a big-scale contractor was felling and removing beeches from about half a mile of woodland. The land on which they grew was a hillside above a stream that went brawling down to the river; beside that stream the dipper and the kingfisher would nest and sometimes a heron would light in and settle down on its banks for a solitary spell of fishing.

I had not heard about the approaching death of these trees, many of which had attained ripeness and had beautiful silver trunks of enormous girth.

One day in March I happened to be walking along the other side of this valley which was overgrown with scrub and afforded a fine view of the great trees on the opposite slope. Suddenly I heard the most appalling sounds. They were cruel sounds such as I had never heard before; one grinding scream followed another yet they were suggestive, not of vocal human agony but of the sinister noise emitted by sirens and jet planes. There was horror in that sound, as if the demons of mechanism had found and were celebrating some cause for jubilation. I stood beside a gorse bush that was in full bloom, I was rooted to the spot with apprehension and then, after a second or two of the most uncanny silence, there came a resounding crash that was not the voice of any mechanical thing. There was a life-time of emotion concentrated in the sound of that crash, the emotion that is a chasm, or a bridge, between life and death.

I cannot explain why, but I found myself remembering the Hallelujah Chorus and the Ride of the Valkyries, I thought of triumph conquering despair and of the words of St. Paul, "Oh Death where is thy sting? Oh grave where is thy victory?" Yet I could not discover the origin of that sound nor could I see any movement in the thick wood on the other side of the valley. I sat down there and waited. Brilliant sunshine fell on the gorse and the scent took me far away from this world. Then it all happened over again, the grinding screams which seemed to last for an eternity and suggested a chorus of well-trained fiends gloating over some crime that they were slowly perpetrating, then that uncanny silence followed by the crashing sound. After

a while I noticed a clearing in the wood through which I could see figures of men moving and a mechanical saw at work and ropes fastened from one tree to another. I hurried away while the fiends were in full chorus for I could not bear to see the headlong fall of one of those noble beeches, nor to hear again that sound which was like a human voice proclaiming something greater than resignation or despair. Every crash was an utterance of dignity and courage face to face with inevitable finality.

We must turn to the second quality of the trees. Never, save perhaps in a waste of polar snow, does there dwell a silence more profound than that which is held in the heart of a wood on a windless day. On such a day in autumn the sound of one acorn falling may be of startling importance. The united silence of many trees, compared with the silence of the desert or snow or frozen water, is weighted like the silence of the crowd on Armistice Day, or the silence in church and temple and mosque during the "pauses of a priestly prayer" when all the bowed heads remain in an attitude of mute individual worship.

In the Old Landlord's ilex avenue the silence could be profound as that in the heart of a forest.

There was one September night that I shall always remember, when I could not sleep for thinking of those trees and the secret that they guarded in the silence lurking beneath their heavy-leaved branches. Even by day there was always a sense of twilight and mystery in that place and on autumn nights, when the human mind is attuned to sober thoughts, the ilex trees always had a peculiar attraction for me. I dressed and moving stealthily went out into the night air. I was alone. Every window was dark.

I approached the trees by way of the open fields that bordered the upper part of the avenue. On that high land one always had a sense of great space and freedom and the air was always cool and pure. I did not care to approach the avenue from below, I preferred to pass through those open fields before entering the trees' sanctuary. The moon had risen and it seemed as if the whole countryside were waiting for something, holding its breath; for a moment this sense in the world about me, of waiting for something, struck a chill of apprehension into my mind that was almost fear. I began to remember how people

looked on that avenue as haunted and how, in the dark they never would approach those beautiful trees. What shape or fantasy might flit to and fro beneath those branches at midnight? The wraith of some woman, perhaps, wailing for her demon lover? Some element of evil reluctant to clothe itself in human form, withdrawn from our sight and touch and hearing? Or a banshee, woman of the fairies, whose cry portended death?

I hesitated in the open fields, filled with these eerie thoughts. Then I turned to seek courage from the great space and I drew in a long breath of air. The height of land, in reality some seven miles away, was now like a misty wall just across the nearest valley and all the intervening country was a blur. Close at hand, on the left, was a strip of woodland reared against the stars like a black wall, crenellated here and there. The grass field was quiet as any stone.

When I opened the gate and stepped into the avenue it was like entering a cave. An owl hooted from a tree on my right. After all, perhaps it was only the barking of some fox, or the owl's reiterated cry that had given birth to strange surmisings, growing in the course of time and repetition into legend, superstition and ghostly tale. For, in the vaulted darkness of the night, a cry from our wild kindred may strike an alien chord wherein fear predominates over every other note.

There was no word of greeting or recognition spoken, there was no awareness on my part of transition from aloneness to fellowship, but there I was, not only among the trees, I was one of them. They had received me into their silence.

I was understanding, as never heretofore, how, despite their response to every blustering approach, every light caress of the wind, they had achieved repose in the heart of their being. The trees were whispering to one another in the faint moonlight, whispering as if they were sentient beings. I could hear them whenever a breeze stirred, cool upon my face, resonant among their leafage. In that night world the trees were far removed from our concerns of everyday. They had companionship with the twilight gathered among their stems, with the far-travelled radiance of stars that came to rest on their leafy summits, with the breeze that had journeyed from unknown lands, passing

swiftly through their leaves and branches and moving on to its uncompanioned searching.

Now, when I had come to the middle of the avenue, there was no light nor any whisper, the moon had gone behind a cloud, the silence in that dark place was like a living presence. Something of deep import was surely happening but no light pricked the leaves, no cry nor rustle quivered on the air which hung there, as if weighted, between earth and sky.

I knew then that it was the worship hour of the trees; in that silence, in that darkness, they were breathing out their spirit, drawing in their strength. They were all reaching to heaven but each one was rooted in the earth in its own place, for ever set alone.

Those ilexes were not the only friendly trees in the possession of the Old Landlord. All round his home the trees were standing in a circle. Some looked down on the house from the top of a grass-grown bank, others were grouped on its northern and eastern side, a protection from winter gales. The monarch of them all was a vast oriental plane, perfect in shape, standing in grass with daffodils about his feet and blue hydrangeas set just beyond the shade that his branches cast. He was like a sentinel or guardian as he stood there year after year looking down on the old Mansion and he was his master's favourite. Visitors would sometimes look round that belt of trees and the shrub garden planted in their shelter and they would exclaim: "How beautifully sheltered you are." But they had never seen that garden as I have sometimes seen it, under the onslaught of a south-west or a north-east gale.

One day I had to take a paper to the Old Landlord for his signature. I found him in the shrubbery, plodding slowly towards a clearing, with two saws hung about his neck on straps. He was strong as any young man in the arms and day after day he waged war on his over-persistent laurels. We made for the nearest tree and he leaned against it for support, placing his sticks beside him while he took and read the paper. It was blowing a full gale from the south-west.

"You can taste the sea," he said, as he signed the paper and handed it back to me.

The sea was quite five miles away in the direction from which the gale was coming but I had always noticed that his somewhat cloistered life had given him a sharpened awareness of wind and weather and nature's seasonal changes and all the forces that may penetrate a garden from the outside world, rain and moonlight, sunshine, wind, frost. In just the same way he was always sensitive to the feelings of outside people who came to him.

The local "dung-dabber," after winning a hundred pounds on a horse and putting the money in the bank had many sleepless nights over a problem which he finally brought to the Old Landlord.

"Won't the bank turn ugly, Sir, ef I draws out the money come September for a new cow-shed?"

He went home reassured.

The washerwoman consulted him about a doctor for little Zephaniah who was hard of hearing, and the post-girl told him all the story of her faithless lover, and so on, and so on, while his correspondence with friends new and old would take up many hours of each day.

We talked a little as I put the paper in my pocket and he stood there leaning against his sycamore. The noise about us was deafening, it was as if a sea of great waves were roaring in the air overhead and the irregularity of their rhythm was exciting as delirium or thunder. With each blast the spruce firs abandoned themselves to a frantic pendulum movement, swaying almost from tip to base. The beeches, with some of their leaves not yet fallen, lent all their upper branches to a mad riot of motion but their trunks were still; the sycamores and ashes maintained the same firmness while their crests seemed to be treading the mazes of an unrehearsed dance. Each Cornish elm appeared to be light-footed as a nymph, hardly attached to the ground; we expected any one of them to fall at any moment. Every tree had lent itself to seize and echo and pass on the sound of the wind's fury.

The Old Landlord looked up to assure himself that there was no over-hanging branch near enough to threaten us. "You see what shelter we need," he said, "I can't afford to cut down *all* the laurels that my forbears grew so lavishly." His gaze was fixed on the tossing branches above and we stood there in silent admiration of the wind's power and the trees' music.

I thought that I could see in his piercing blue eyes the light of ancient battles, for he had served in four wars; and the memory of long travels, for he had lived in three continents; but I saw also, and of this I was certain, that light of the spirit which has understanding for the things that we may not see and the things that we cannot tell to one another in our human speech. This man, whose lot had cast him for a soldier, might well have been a seer, a poet, or a prophet. There are some, I thought, who transcend their own profession because that one career in one life-time is such a little thing.

I left him, leaning against the sycamore, still listening to the music of the wind in the trees. Not for the first time it flashed across me that he himself was like a tree, rooted in his own place but responsive to every call from beyond and from above.

8

CUCKOO COTTAGE

Among all the tidal branches of the river, Frenchman's Creek is generally remembered and admired as the most beautiful. Again and again the Old Landlord could have enriched himself by selling small plots of land on the west side of that creek. Again and again he refused to sell what he regarded as absolute beauty. This inlet is longer than the others, more densely wooded on both sides, more mysterious. Locally it is always known as Frenchman's Pill, or simple as the Pill, which is the Cornish word for pool or creek.

At the eastern entrance to the Pill there lived for many years a grand old man, a fisherman-artist-philosopher who planted *Pinus insignis* trees as a screen about his little house. He was a man who lived with the comings and goings of winds and tides and season, who shared the lives of birds and plants and staunchly adhered to his own sense of reality, in a world of changing values. Except that he did not evade his taxes nor produce another "Walden" he might have been a modern Thoreau.

At low tide the Pill is only a narrow trickle of water moving down through a silent world of mud but you could hardly imagine a more beautiful journey than rowing up its whole length on a rising and nearly full tide. As your waterway becomes narrow and narrower the trees on either shore seem to enfold you, almost as if with a personal caress and with every stroke of the oars you leave your accustomed thoughts further behind you. Sometimes, from one of the overhanging banks, a kingfisher will flash out and will cross the water in front of you, beautiful and sudden as lightning.

The first time I rowed up to the end, or rather to the beginning, of the creek was on a day of September. I remember looking up through the trees and seeing a glint of gold from fields where the corn stood in shocks and as I rowed on and on the line of water narrowed and the trees behind closed in on me, keeping

me safe in a place where no trouble could enter, where the ancient gods were surely reigning in serenity.

The creek is already very narrow when you notice, on the right, a deserted quay now covered with grass. There, if the tide has not begun to fall, it may be that you will land and rest for a while. In January you can pick snowdrops just above that quay, in summer you will perhaps sit on a fallen log or lie at full length on the grass and dream for a space of time. Seldom will there be a voice or footfall to disturb the silence round that quay. A little further, you pass on the left a small beach where a boat is usually laid up for the winter. Then, in three minutes, your journey is over. Beneath a rough stone foot-bridge the woodland stream comes down to lose itself in mud and tidal water.

When I came first to that bridge after being, or so it seemed to me, away from all human voices for uncounted hours, I saw, to my surprise, some white ducks waddling about on the margin of the river and a whitewashed cottage gleaming through the trees, and then I turned quickly and began to row back again, for I could not bear the intrusion of humanity in that solitude. I felt too that there was something sinister about those ducks and that dwelling-place.

It was many years later when I became, for a while, part owner of that cottage. It all happened because of Maria's passion for house-furnishing and decoration. She did not sing nor play the harp, she seldom read a poem and she could not paint a picture but she dearly loved to make a home beautiful, a little home or a big one, it mattered not at all to her which it was, when once she had set her mind to work on the chosen interior.

We were sitting over her fire one afternoon, eating Turkish delight and toasting the soles of our feet and then and there it was that we arranged to rent, furnish and share a cottage for picnics, day pleasures and lending to our friends.

"It would be such a rest," Maria said wistfully, with her head a little on one side and a voice that suggested the frustration of many day-dreams in her past. I knew exactly what she meant. A rest from the presence of her well-trained menials, from the languorous effect of smooth routine, even from the unremitting and devoted attentions of her family. She wanted to have a place

Cuckoo Cottage

where she could relax and feel that no one wanted her, where she could brew her own cup of tea at her own time and be sure that if there should be a hole in her stocking it did not really matter.

I agreed with her, as I usually did on external matters, and then we looked about us and finally we rented and furnished that cottage buried among green trees at the far end of Frenchman's Pill. On the day that we took possession there were cuckoos calling to one another in the wood and we named it Cuckoo Cottage.

Many strange things did I learn from Maria during our joint tenancy of that little house. First of all she ransacked her attics and mine for kitchen stools and chairs and then, having found some and shortened their legs, she persuaded Kimiel to row them across the river to our cottage, where they at once assumed the air of old inhabitants. Then, after many shopping expeditions, she produced yards and yards of a very hard and crackling chintz, with a pattern of rosebuds on a pale yellow background. After this there was a pause in her preparations and then a discussion arose between Kimiel and herself that looked, for a moment, like becoming an impasse.

Kimiel's worst enemy could never have accused him of being a snob or even a fastidious man but it seemed that he drew the line at acting, in the face of all his river friends and acquaintances, as ferryman to a couple of hip baths.

Maria settled the question by draping them, once they were settled in his boat, with a gaily coloured bedspread. Kimiel rowed over his strange cargo in the late evening when few people were about and on disembarking at the end of the creek he manfully shouldered the twins, one after the other, conveying them across the stone bridge and up the narrow path to the cottage. Maria, who had accompanied him across the water, followed with her arms full of cushions; and now I shall reveal to all whom it may interest her own secret for achieving a perfectly relaxed position without actually going to bed.

First of all you make a fitted chintz cover for the whole bath; having fitted this on to your model you place a round and ample cushion in the bottom; next you drape sausage-shaped cushions with a petticoat frill all round the rim and then you put in a

large soft cushion at the back and, lowering yourself carefully you sink down with your legs hanging over the front. All these cushions she covered with the rose-bud chintz and though I never could abide its crackle I took to her cottage arm-chairs like a duck to water and enjoyed hours of supreme comfort in them.

Maria Pendragon had too much sense of beauty to overfurnish the cottage and we only kept there things that we really needed, but the glass and china was all old and beautiful, the beds were comfortable, and as for the stone floors they were strewn with bright rugs, collected from here and there and anywhere, which blended happily, like flowers in a border, with each other.

We distempered the walls with sunshine yellow, we placed one or two gnomeish stools, a table and the two hip baths in the parlour, while a gaffer's upright chair was settled in a corner of the kitchen and Maria's willow-pattern plates adorned the dresser.

"We must keep it all very homely and cottagey," she said.

Every time we went there we would collect from the wood all round our cottage dry sticks and boughs for fuel and then we would light a fire on the little square hearth and after pottering about we would tidy up the mess that we had made, and after tea of course we would throw the tea-leaves outside on a rose-bush. Maria wielding duster and broom was like an artist with his chosen tool or instrument; I would follow her round feeling rather like a cow in a china shop but full of appreciation for the little home that we had made.

"It is so peaceful here," she would say, after such an afternoon spent in continual motion, as we locked up the door and separated, Maria speeding homewards in her little boat with an outboard motor and I turning to the fields and lanes.

As for the evil atmosphere that I had felt about the place when I first saw the cottage and the ducks, one or two pseudo-psychic friends would sniff inauspiciously when they came near the front-door and assume a startled air, murmuring strange words about ancient crimes and smugglers and robbery and murder. But one friend, more given to thought and less to self-expression than the others, would spend long days alone in the cottage, just

thinking her own kind and happy thoughts; and in the end all were agreed that Cuckoo Cottage had an atmosphere of peace.

No sooner were the hip baths fully draped, the beds made up and a store of firewood collected and stored in a lean-to beside the tiny garden, than the question of a house-warming party arose. Our thoughts were centred on a certain neighbour who lived on the Pendragons' side of the water and was always known as "Kindness Itself." Elderly, opulent, stout and genial, she was in fact everyone's benefactor and never had we found a chance of returning her abundant hospitality. She loved the river only a little less intimately than the Old Landlord loved it, or the Pendragons, or myself; she loved also boating, fishing, moonlight picnics and young people, many of whom had adopted her firmly and finally as "Aunt."

"What about showing her the stone under which we keep our key and giving her the freedom of the cottage?" said one of us, and the others all agreed. We consulted the tide chart and invited her to tea at the cottage on a day when her boat could almost reach the stone bridge at four o'clock. Kimiel was deputed to stand in waiting and to arm her ashore on to a tiny patch of grass and firm mud beside the bridge, while Maria and I and the rest of the party were preparing tea. There was only one fear in our minds. The hip baths.

Our benevolent friend had a figure that is commonly described as "broad in the beam" and we pictured her rising up from an hour of ease in one of our cottage arm-chairs and finding it affixed to her person.

Kimiel was given instructions to steer her away from the hips and from the little gnome-ish stools and to place and keep her in the gaffer's upright chair. He performed his duties faithfully with that breezy manner which he always accentuated when addressing the elderly and the young, and the party was a complete success.

For two or three summers that cottage was the scene of many a moonlight picnic and more than one budding romance. Sometimes also Maria and I would meet there in the winter, she arriving by boat and I on foot, and we would sit over the fire talking at leisure about this world and many others. Or I would go down there alone, kindle a fire, settle myself in a hip-bath

with a book or two beside me and enjoy complete solitude. Often, instead of reading, I would sit gazing out of the window at that wall of trees rising to the sky and feeling the quiet of that place as if it were soft music.

How little one learns in thirty years of living! I remembered my white and gold copy of the "Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius," a treasure bought in school days for one shilling, and how I had marked with a double line a certain passage on solitude.

> "Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, sea-shores, and mountains, and thou too art wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in thy power whenever thou shalt choose to retire into thyself . . . and I affirm that tranquillity is nothing else than the good ordering of the mind."

I believe that everyone who went there came to love the quiet of that cottage in the wood in his or her own individual fashion.

One day Maria arranged a little supper party.

"Only just ourselves and the Stranger," she said.

She always spoke of him as the "Stranger" because he had been abroad so many years; he was an old friend of herself and Kimiel and he was now staying in a luxury hotel on the Falmouth side of the river.

"Oh no, don't bring any supper," said Maria, when I volunteered to play my part with the provisions. "It's just a simple picnic and I will see to it."

When the evening came it occurred to me that Maria had all the trouble of the picnic basket and the trip across the river and that I had better go on early and light the fires. It was a ritual in summer and winter alike to light a fire whenever we visited the cottage. I was struck dumb with surprise when I arrived, an hour early, and found the little kitchen filled with voices.

Maria's old cook, a lady of witch-like physiognomy and uncertain temper, was in command. Gyrating round her was Maria's married couple. The kitchen nearly overflowed with bottles, baskets, packages, with cushions and with Persian rugs. The young-man half of the couple was adorned in white, like a chef, his wife wore the muslin apron of some very exquisite

parlourmaid. While they stowed the parcels and lit the fire the old witch emitted a hailstorm of directions and commands. I sat upon the little staircase and watched the scene.

A Persian rug, the best one from Maria's own bedroom, was laid upon the parlour floor, two others were taken out and spread on the strip of grass below the cottage. Soon the kitchen assumed the appearance of a cafeteria with tempting plates of food laid out, and when Maria herself arrived, with a leisured air, carrying three rose-buds, all was ready.

With the help of a husband and two sons she gave several last touches to the scene, and then she settled the roses in a valuable pewter mug on the cottage mantelpiece.

The party had by now acquired quite large dimensions. There were Maria and Kimiel Pendragon; two of their sons who had each produced, from the lower reaches of the river, a trousered fairy as companion; a couple of young neighbours; and myself. Nine of us were now awaiting the arrival of the Stranger and his son.

Unheralded and silently they stole upon us. Somewhere, down near the mouth of the Pill, there must have been heard the chug, chug of their motor launch and then the splash of oars as they pulled their dinghy into the heart of the enfolding wood. It was nearly high-water and in the last narrow tongue of the creek two swans were moving slowly, each one brilliant as light in that haunt of dark green trees and dark green water; they were like pride incarnate, disdainful of human intrusion, absorbed in their own stately progress.

So the Stranger came into the depth of that woodland peace.

Then he was among us, with sensitive and bronze-complexioned face, with clothes superbly tailored, a man of wide experience and many journeys who had sought and found the greater beauties of the world and had not made an end of seeking. At once it was as if he had been with us always, he was a part of our Cuckoo Cottage, he was at one with the peace of those green trees.

Maria's gnome-ish tables were set upon the grass and loaded with choice food. The Stranger, having in such matters individual notions, had brought for his own supper an apple and a slice of bread and cheese but, undeterred by this simplicity of the

honoured guest, Maria set all her wheels in motion. Her minions and her family waited on us while we reclined like Roman emperors upon the Persian rugs.

It was like a fairy-tale. You raised an eyelid or a finger and your plate was filled, your glass was overflowing, and to crown the feast great bowls of cream and strawberries and raspberries went round and round in circle. Then swiftly the debris were removed. For us there was no fussing about with hearth and kettles, knives and crockery, everything was done as if by unseen hands.

When the sun had sunk below that wall of trees we settled into baths and chairs or lay on rugs around the parlour fire. And then the Stranger talked.

As he talked I hung upon his words, being filled with the most peculiar sensations. Much of this I had heard before, in another time and place, long, long ago and very far away and the Stranger was no stranger to me. Once we had followed the same star together and now I was for ever free of his language. The others sitting round us in a semi-circle were now nothing more than images, lay figures that knew nothing of his origin and mine, nothing of our complicity, nothing of the journey on which we two had been embarked through unreckoned time and unmeasured space.

But that is all another story without beginning or end and we did not actually exchange more than a casual word or two. Whether he ever observed the Persian rug at his feet none of us ever knew, although when I returned in spirit to the shallow present I saw that he was gazing fixedly at one corner of its pattern.

Then the voice of Kimiel rang out: "Tide is falling fast," he said in a boatswain's tone of command.

"All very simple and cottagey," I whispered in Maria's ear as the party broke up but she gave me one quelling glance and I said no more.

Her stagecraft was triumphant and when the little fleet of boats turned homeward, the minions leading in order that they might ensure Pendragon comfort at the other end, every one was filled with contentment. The sons with their attendant

fairies set off in one boat, Maria seated on a heap of cushions with Kimiel at the oars followed in another, then came the neighbours and last of all the Stranger and his son. I was left alone for my three-mile walk home through fields and lanes.

Before he stepped into his boat the Stranger turned to look at the darkened woods behind him and I knew that in all his wanderings he had never found what he found at Cuckoo Cottage. One by one the boats disappeared round the bend of the creek. A clear lemon sky hung over the wall of trees. Only those two stately swans remained, like white flowers on green water, guardians of that solitary place.

If I have lingered at undue length over our picnics and our parties and our quiet hours at Cuckoo Cottage it is because they took place in the last days of an epoch. A shadow was even then creeping over our world, sometimes remote as a forgotten tooth-ache and yet always to a certain extent present in our minds, a shadow that was destined to blot sunlight from the lives of millions.

Never again would the united Pendragon family and I experience such a carelessly happy summer. Never again would all that family come together purely for their own pleasure.

As I look back on those days so clearly outlined in memory and then look back also on the subsequent days and years, so overcrowded and confused with new experience, I see that not one of us could or would have hoped for immunity in the coming disaster, although at the time we hardly connected the shadow with our own petty concerns. Before the end we were all involved, the old, the young, the helpless, just as surely as the active ones. Only the river, with its unassailable rhythm suffered no change in its tidal routine. Yet even the river was doomed to change its function and its aspect where human beings were concerned.

Private dinghies disappeared; they were too dangerous. An enemy, *the* enemy, might land on the Lizard peninsula and make use of them to cross the river and attack Falmouth. Tourist steamers were no more seen ; oil and fuel might no longer be used for such frivolous purposes as a pleasure trip and there was no private oil and fuel, the nation owned it all now and owned

everything else, yet there was little grumbling, for all knew that the nation was fighting for its life. Strange contraptions barred the mouth of the river or floated in the anchorage and a hideous little jetty was run out from the loveliest beach in all the west. River traffic was strictly controlled and every entrance and exit of sea-craft was observed and recorded by the new Commodore, Kimiel Pendragon.

Thus and thus was our river regimented to play its part in the second world war. But the alliance of the moon and the tides remained unbroken, nor could any device of scientist or sailor gain, for national purposes, one minute's grace from the remorseless ebb and flow of the tide.

9

EVACUATION

Evacuation! What an uncouth sound it has.

There was a day when we never used the word. We knew its meaning of course but it was reserved for physical functions that we did not mention; also we would meet it in our history books, in dull passages concerned with armies and a fortress or a siege and the tactics adopted by army leaders when the worst came to the worst.

As for the actual "Evacuees," how many of those cheerful cockney urchins, those girls and boys, toddlers and infants, those expectant or accomplished mothers, ever dreamed of their strange destiny when they lived their urban lives in the long ago days of peace? How many could foresee that they would be ordered suddenly to leave their menfolk and their homes, their kitchens and their parlours and their beds, the fish-and-chips shop and the markets and the pub? And to leave them not at the menace of a conquering army advancing on their town but at the mere rumour of a far-away foreign maniac who was moving millions of his own countrymen about and to and fro for no reason at all and was bellowing into a tube on his writing-table ugly threats to men of alien blood. They were ordered to leave their homes and the comfortable security given by old habits and familiar sights and sounds, for what? For a wilderness where the houses never touched each other and there was never a voice calling across the street because there *was* no street and there were no neighbours; for a wilderness where you could not put your hand on anything, where never a pint of beer nor any tins of food were to be had round the corner, where apples and potatoes were never to be seen on barrows for they grew on trees or in the ground, where nothing ever happened, where everybody was half dead and the silence and the emptiness, to say nothing of the strangeness, were hardly to be borne.

Yes they had been sent forth suddenly into the wilderness, each

one alone with the children, with not a husband nor a grown son to keep them company. And what for? London was still there. Many of the mothers drifted back to their homes and their men, taking the children with them and some of these became what was known as "civilian casualities." Others were evacuated again and yet again at different stages of the war. That was how "evacuation" and "evacuees" came into our everyday speech.

Such was the Londoners' side of the question when they came to live in our district. The river brought no peace to them, they would have found some measure of contentment in the nearest town but it was five miles distant and every bus was crowded. There was no denying that they had been sent to live in a wilderness.

Yet things did not happen in unpremeditated manner, the evacuation was not a general's emergency order in face of war. It was a foreseen, carefully planned scheme, organized in every detail many months before its execution became necessary, as we, the humble workers in the country end of the business, knew only too well.

* * *

Wood-pigeons were crooning in the bare branches; dark ash-buds were ready to burst their sheaths; twigs of oak trees were a maze, outlined on sunlight in the upper air, they made silver zig-zags on a sky that was all blue. The wood was full of moss and dead leaves, its carpet of brown and green was starred by white anemones with open faces and celandines made pools of gold here and there and primroses caught and held a cool light that was neither altogether white nor altogether yellow and the stream burbled its cheerful song that had no rise and fall nor any climax.

It was warm as summer in that wood and I might have been a thousand miles from any city with its roar of turning wheels and sound of many feet hurrying on pavements. Only now and then a lorry went grinding up the road that cut the wood into two, winding unseen through the valley that corkscrews from the Helford river to the downs. Once I heard a churring overhead and there were three forms outlined on the sky like monstrous dragon-flies, hurrying across the pattern of twigs. Then all this happened again; lorries and planes, planes and lorries, destined

as surely to increase and multiply beyond all reckoning as other things would diminish or even disappear, butter for example, and lighted windows and peaceful sleep.

All these things were unknown to me and unimagined, although my hours in that lovely wood were numbered. This was no Golden Age in which a man had not any better occupation than to linger through the whole show of earth and sky from dawn to sunset, praising with his mute happiness the unknown gods who made the beauty of the world. It was time for me to leave that wood and the beautiful company of wood anemones and to set out, with a sheaf of buff-coloured evacuation forms, towards the scattered farms.

The first one was no more than a thatched cottage, it was drowsing in sunlight with a face of utter peacefulness, a shaggy dog was sleeping in the open doorway and a comforting scent of wallflowers filled the air. Mrs. Polcrebar came out in answer to my knock. She was wiping both hands on the corner of her apron as she led me to the parlour where we both sat down and for several minutes passed the time of day. Then I explained my business.

"Do ee think war's comin then?" she asked, looking out of the window as if she were hearing even now the steps of some unwanted visitor.

"I don't know," I answered, with a dull feeling in my heart that I could not keep out of my voice. "But the more we prepare for it the less likely it is to come."

I put before her the plans for evacuating London children to the country. I was using trite phrases. We of the W.V.S., the new hybrids of the species "war-worker," had already adopted such phrases, partly in sheer bewilderment at the questions that we could not answer, partly as defence for our prying activities that were concerned with other people's homes and business. We were all bewildered because, in a world of such beauty, where day after day the sap was rising, bird-song was filling wood and garden, tree-buds were swelling into leafage and flowers coming into bloom, there were thousands and thousands of men preparing with all their skill and force and ingenuity to destroy life which not one of them could ever build up again. I emerged

from my own thoughts to hear Mrs. Pencrebar giving me her point of view.

"Tes like this eare," she was saying, "my boy Jack he's a willin lad an a honnest lad though I says it as shudden, but from a cheeled e was afeard to go out in the dark an ef they chillun med be comin in the middle of the night why I cudden abear to ax the boy to go for un. I'd raythęr laive im bide."

I marked a blank on the transport list against that farm and walked across a valley, that was gold and white with gorse and blackthorn, to another farm at the end of a winding lane, where I found the buildings all bathed in the same sunshine and lapped in the same peace. Miss Matilda Trounson was busy in the kitchen putting a tray of heavy-cake into the oven. I laboured through my preamble. Already I was beginning to say those words in parrot fashion.

"My Lor what a come-out!" she cried, one arm poised on each roomy hip. "What ever will the poor lil dearrs do? I tell ee what," and she sat down and leaned towards me confidentially, "I wud dearrly love to ave a lil babby two-three year old, wethout its mammy. Aw the dearr av it! Do ee think ee cud send me waun?"

I hesitated. Enthusiasm was scarce. It would be hateful to damp it.

"Well you know," I told her, "it might all happen in a hurry and there'd be a great number of children to sort and send out to their billets and the mothers might be coming too. Of course we'd try."

"Me brother William-John shall go!" she cried. "But I'm thinkin," and she leaned even closer and spoke in a whisper, "wudden the lil dearrs be frighted to come along in a car weth a strange man?"

"There'll be women as well with cars," I assured her, though I was well aware that only two women in the parish could drive a car and only one of them had passed her test. "Perhaps they could bring the nervous children," I added.

"I'd putt a bullet into that theare Itler an do it weth a good eart," she said, as she prepared to sign her name on E.D.60 and on the large buff card. Suddenly she turned on me, pen in hand.

"Tedden no death-warrant I be signing? I do like to knaw what I be puttin my name to."

She signed Matilda Trounson in a spider-crawling hand. I had won my first recruit.

As I stepped out into the sunlight war seemed to be just a little further off.

It was April in 1939.

* * *

There was a certain summer evening, some time in August, I do not remember the exact date, the next date of importance was September the 3rd. Yet I can never forget that evening. Those porpoises in frenzied procession are fixed exactly in my mind as if I were looking at them now. Through all these subsequent years they have remained in memory like a frieze sculptured on enduring stone.

Actually they did not at first appear to Maria and myself as porpoises. They were plunging demons that came out of the silent darkness of our river, lashing the quiet water into waves beneath a red and gibbous moon. For the moon had risen though daylight was not quite faded as we passed Groyne Point and Merthen Quay, and the water, as I remember it, was black near either shore and silver in the middle. We were heading for the eastern tip of Vellan Tremayne in Maria's little boat, after spending a happy day together in the Calamansac woods and now she was ferrying me across to my side of the Helford. The world of trees and water all about us was utterly still until we came to the bay above Tremayne boat-house where boats can lie at anchor.

Then suddenly without any warning our boat began to rock and a splashing sound came out of the twilight calm, it came nearer and nearer to us like an advancing enemy. We peered out to the middle of the river but we could only see a horde of unfamiliar black forms in furious motion and all about that horde were the silver margins of broken water. The silence about us had been a vacuum, now it was filled with those splashing noises that grew louder every minute. Then that moving mass came nearer and it was no longer a mass but one sinuous line of porpoises, all leaping furiously into the air and then ploshing back with utter abandonment into the water, yet keeping line

in the procession; we could see each porpoise in silhouette, each curved back in the act of leaping or plunging.

Maria steered into the shingle beach where I was to land. Darkness was closing in on us and our boat and we could not tell if that darkness were a threat or a protection. I landed, scrambled up the low cliff, stood in the open field and shouted "Goodnight" to Maria as she steered her little vessel back towards the porpoises. A strange shiver came over me as I stood gazing down into the dark river, listening to the chug of her engine and the sound of splashing water, both growing fainter every instant. Was it a shiver of ecstasy at the beauty of that red moon and the strange procession in mid river? It may have been. Or was it fear for Maria's safety as she travelled down towards the sea in company with those plunging demons? Perhaps. Or was it a premonition of things to come, a passionate sense of apprehension echoed even in the animal world by the presence of those sea-mammals so far away from their usual haunts, and reinforced by the sinister aspect of the moon? I do not know.

A few days later the shadow that was creeping over the face of the world had reached the Helford river and was affecting every one of our little lives.

* * *

It must have been on one of the very last days of August that I set out as usual with my weekly load of garden produce for the large hotel by the sea. The tourist season was at its height and all the hotels were full of rich business men and their families from the Midlands and the North. Tomatoes had been ordered, if I remember rightly, and plums and wineberries.

The manageress was in a frustrated mood, irritable and almost in tears, shut away by herself in a tiny circle of self-pity. She took in the produce and paid me with reluctance.

"Half my visitors have gone," she said, "gone at a moment's notice. And the next lot have all cancelled. Even if war doesn't come now the summer business is finished. A fortnight too soon. It is a desperate state of affairs. A dead loss."

Then her face relaxed and she made a remark that startled me, for it sounded as if she really wanted war to come and stimulate the business. "The only hope is," she said, without stopping to

think of the implications beneath her words, "I hear that people are leaving their London homes and taking rooms in hotels in remote country places beyond the reach of bombs."

So the voluntary evacuation of the rich had already begun.

* * *

We had come to the first Saturday in September.

The billetting lists had only just come from the Rural District Council. They had been made out three months earlier in a skeleton form and many amendations had now become necessary. We received new orders about Accompanied and Unaccompanied children with every hour that passed and we spent our time sending round messages to those who were to hold themselves in readiness to receive evacuees at a moment's notice, or sifting the lists, or writing out new lists as yet another message came in from our W.V.S. Centre Organizer, or sifting them again as new excuses came in from householders. Our job was to keep our heads, to weigh judicially the merits and excuses of each household while the claims of the new homeless were, so to speak, knocking on our doors.

So much had happened since the previous April. People were changing homes at Michaelmas, private refugees from London had already filled some allotted homes, rooms that were empty three months ago were now filled by permanent lodgers, and several householders who were suffering from illness or nerves sent word that they were unable to keep their promise. The whole thing was like a giant jig-saw puzzle with missing parts.

Every one was milling around in the chapel vestry that was our temporary office and we were all feeling rather lost. We were all longing for activity to deaden thought but now there was nothing more for us to do. We were looking round at each other in despair when a message came from the Old Landlord asking that half a dozen of the Committee should come up, when they were free, to inspect the Great Office adjoining the Mansion. Many weeks ago this hall had been earmarked for the reception and sorting of evacuees. The six chosen delegates repaired to the Great Office without delay. They found the Old Landlord awaiting them.

He and his wife had got the hall ready. Everyone agreed that

she was a worker when she was under his direction. The place had been swept from end to end, there were benches for the children, chairs for the teachers, and two table complete with writing materials for those who would have to keep the records and check the lists. The Old Landlord seemed to be the only calm person in the parish and he certainly made us feel, without himself speaking a word on the subject, that we were doing a worthy and active job in merely standing by.

Suddenly Mrs. Penalewy arrived, bursting into the hall with a message from the Centre Organizer.

"She've just had word there'll be seventy children coming tomorrow," she said in a breathless voice and collapsed on to the nearest bench. We were all speechless, realizing that the call had come.

"Light refreshments shall be ready," announced the Old Landlord.

"But tes Saturday to-day," wailed Mrs. Penelewy as if she were tolling a funeral bell. "All the bakers is shut."

"That is perfectly all right," he assured her, "our cook will have eighty buns ready. There are the teachers to be remembered. And you ladies," he smiled on the six and on Mrs. Penalewy with that smile which could almost melt a stone and added: "I shall rely on you to serve the tea."

Later it became a well-known story how he and the Shadow dealt with their household in this crisis. The cook received the news and the order without a murmur, turned up her sleeves and set to work. Not so the Edwardian housemaid. The Mansion was to receive eight evacuees and beds had been prepared by the second housemaid under due supervision.

"What time are the little Orrors coming?" enquired the Edwardian one, with a certain tone of intimacy that she had adopted when speaking to her employers ever since they had celebrated her jubilee. "It's my afternoon out this Sunday."

"Yes," said the Shadow, "we know that, but we thought you might like to help receive them."

"Why must they come on a Sunday?" was the answer.

"Please yourself," said the Old Landlord, breaking in on the discussion. It is certain that he did not say those words flippantly,

nor with that look on his face which we all assume to-day when we shrug our shoulders and say: "I couldn't care less." He meant it quite literally; he was fond of using homely phrases but he could often invest simple words with new dignity.

It is generally believed that the ancestral housemaid swept out of the room in silence, with a single creak of protest from the belt of her starched apron but at any rate his words had worked like a charm for she attended the reception and took charge of a teapot there. But as a matter of fact that reception never took place on the morrow. It was several weeks later when the party did arrive and she, without a word of protest, gave up her afternoon out in order to lend a hand. What is more, despite her dread of the little "Orrors" and despite the fact that five of the eight were bed-wetters and that the blankets were the pride of her life, she was motherly and kind to them all.

* * *

Sunday morning came.

At 8.30 a.m. I called for Mrs. Knuckey and pinned on her arm the badge of a Traffic Marshal. Never before had this kindly woman marshalled anything or anybody, save perhaps her own sons and her husband, and she was a little dazed with the importance of her post. I drove her fifteen miles to the town where we were to await the arrival of the evacuees. Thirteen other Parish Organizers and thirteen other Traffic Marshals were converging on that town; we were all at the railway station by nine-thirty. The station master was to be a demi-god for that one day and we, under his command, were to pack rations for 640 evacuees and then await their train.

Twenty-eight of us were round the great man like a swarm of bees, our united questions had a strange humming sound, probably we were all saying the same words.

"No train," he announced briefly. "All cancelled."

For one moment hope leaped up again, yet it was almost agony to feel once more the uncertainty of hope when the certainty of war had begun to induce in one's mind a measure of calm.

"That means better news?" we asked in a humming chorus.

"No," he said, "worse. They got them out yesterday to places not so far west. The trains are wanted for other things to-day."

The swarm broke into a louder chorus. "Then all our work is wasted."

The dethroned semi-god said nothing. What was there to say? Does war bring any constructive work in its train? As well be occupied in making and cancelling arrangements for evacuees as in filling sand-bags or bombing living creatures. Did anything matter in this futile, bitter world? I took my Traffic Marshal by the elbow, just below the useless badge, and drove home at full speed; we were arranging lists of messengers to cancel billets as we flashed through the quiet lanes. There were forty-odd helpers and householders who were awaiting a summons for the day's work.

By eleven-thirty the messages were sent. I went to report to the Old Landlord. We sat down to await the noon bulletin. The Prime Minister spoke.

"No such undertaking had been received."

Since eleven o'clock, therefore, we had been at war with Germany.

Well, there was only one cleavage in the nation now, the line between those who had immediate work for their country and those who were standing by. Down here we were remote from the call for immediate sacrifice. But we were standing by.

10

DOWN HERE

At this point, or actually at a point about a week before the cancelling of the evacuees' arrival, there is a break in my Helford memories.

A chasm opened up in our world-as-we-know-it, splitting nations asunder and crying halt to the concerns of the least of us. Or was it a great flood that came upon us, wiping out immemorial landmarks, breaking down seen and unseen barriers, seeping into each backwater where habit had formed a scum over the living current, levelling and undermining and destroying with the relentless force of a machine set in motion by human hands unable to stop its activity?

When we did emerge from the six years flood it was only to find ourselves in a changed universe, where money had kept its glitter but had lost half its power; where children had grown prematurely into parents, heroes, heroines, or into a mere memory of something that never had its chance; where the not-so-very-young had become old people overnight and the ranks of dead acquaintances had swelled to strange proportions while our minds had been concerned with more important things than death by natural causes and so we had never registered their departure; where politeness, leisure, the domestic servant as a species, security and quietness of mind had become almost extinct; where queues and bustle and knitted brows had come to stay, like barnacles on a ship.

The strain of war left nearly all of us permanently shadowed by a demon, not whispering but shouting at our elbow: "Work . . . while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work."

We could not cease from working and, moreover, the yearning to be where we were not had taken possession of us all. Airmen and car-drivers were, no doubt, the most favoured among men, but even while they tasted their speed they could not always overtake this yearning. Plain people had radio, they

need no longer listen to the voice in their own home, they could hear London speak and Canberra and Honolulu. The elect had television and betrayed less and less interest in their immediate surroundings, for they could sit at home and see the Queen of Barungoolloo eating calabash and watch the Senators orating in America. Fewer and fewer of us had remained content to contemplate the little things beside our own door, the daisies at our feet, or even the stars in the sky. The "let-us-then-be-up-and-doing" fever had become for most of us a chronic malady and if we ever did sit at ease for a while or cease from toil, we would feel as if we had formed an unholy alliance with the Spivs.

All of us after leaping the chasm that opened up on that day of September in 1939 felt, as we found ourselves in 1945 on the yonder side of it, as if we were astray. We were lost in a world without maps.

Perhaps every change is a leap in time across a chasm from Before to After, a hiatus in space between Here and There, for one can no more touch and examine Change than one can hold a breath in the palm of one's hand.

So completely altered was our outlook by 1945 that it is now almost impossible to recapture our thoughts and feelings of 1939. I turn to an old diary that records, from a local point of view, the course of those early days in the second Great World War, and what do I find? Never an account of great changes in their moment of performance but just a chronicle of small beer. Yet, had I been an eavesdropper at Berchtesgaden or in Whitehall, could I, with my own limitations, have made a true history of the war? Could anyone have done so? To each one of us his own reach and his own limitations. Even personal and local matters have their own place in the evolution of that elusive thing which we call Change. A revised menu for breakfast; the slaughter of millions; both are significant.

What a strange thought it is that even my little diary of day by day happenings is now a part of history. I will let it speak for those of us who lived beside the river, as it records how we faced, or did not face, what came to us.

"*August.* 1939.

We are in the heart of the second major crisis that we have

faced in the last twelve months. We wait on the words of newspapers and wireless as we wait on the doctor's words at the bedside of a dying friend. The hotels are suddenly emptied, all the summer visitors are ebbing out from farm and cottage in one swift tide, tourists are rushing north to join the forces, return to their jobs, set their houses in order, fetch away their pet dogs.

Every one of us is looking out over the rim of accustomed daily life into some unknown abyss. In a few days time which of our plans, occupations and habits will matter? Even now we make no plans, not even to visit a friend for an hour or two next week and if any one is forgetful enough to suggest coming here for lunch or tea, I just answer 'Yes' while my one thought is 'If.' We are peering, half paralysed, into the days immediately ahead. What shall we be doing next week? Receiving evacuated children, listening to the guns, waiting for the bombs?

* * *

Already catch-phrases attach themselves to this terror that we hardly dare look in the face, this thing that is going to change the lives of millions, this thing called War. If war comes, we say, just as if it were something outside our own volition that might fall on us from the sky or stalk down on us from the horizon. We do not seem to remember that we have self-government as human beings and that if we fight to kill each other we do so because we are not highly developed enough to have outgrown that crude method of settling our claims. So-and-so will 'go' we say and that word 'go' has a dreadful significance now. We speak also of Jitterers and Defeatists and Evacuees as if they were established species of the human race.

To-night there was no news and after any newsless hour we seem to breathe more freely.

How one clings to these quiet days of sunshine, spent in moving about the garden, with the ripe corn-fields lying so still in the country. One wants no more of life than such work and such stillness. How many days are left of such a life?

Another day has passed and nothing has happened. We try to comfort each other. 'Every hour when nothing happens is

all to the good,' says one neighbour to another. Do we really believe that? Already we have some of the sensations of the doomed prisoner who is given a week's or even a day's reprieve.

The gardener always brings me the wireless news in the morning as if I were not capable of hearing it myself. 'Our Feller,' he tells me, 'e've been to see Itler. Mebbe they'll come to some agreement like.' And he goes on watering the plants in the greenhouse while I pick the small and unsaleable tomatoes for soup and wonder if the day will come when we shall all have to conserve and eat our mouldy vegetables.

* * *

Poland has accepted the principle of conciliation suggested by Roosevelt, who has appealed to Hitler to do the same. Is this a ray of hope? If Hitler says 'No' to Roosevelt, what would be his position, morally speaking, in the world? But does he consider the world or moral issues for one moment? He is losing his patience with Poland he says. Is he shut into a self-appointed isolation that he mistakes for the whole world? Does he see anything at all except Germany's wrongs, needs, ambitions?

With that ray of hope I tried to forget the crisis and went to visit my aged, active-minded mother. She was poring over *The Times* in deep depression. Could I tell her what the Old Landlord, with all his experience of war, thought about the situation? He was one of the few people whose opinions she respected. Her mind went ranging over questions hardly relevant to the crisis, with great agility and many changes of direction.

'My dear grandchild will be the first to go,' she said, with a sudden incursion into the realms of sentiment. 'They are sure to want her. You know she is fully qualified with her pilot's certificate.'

I grunted as I thought of my niece. 'She'll only be scrubbing out hangars,' I said maliciously.

She turned the subject to her chauffeur, she was very angry with him for not wishing to join the Navy at once.

'You can't hitlerize him into joining up,' I said, 'not yet.'

Country surrounding Cuckoo Cottage.

She sighed and changed the subject again and became piercingly witty at the expense of her neighbours. It was good to get away from the topic of war and I joined in with gusto. Then she told me how she had arranged her servants' holidays. It was good also to gossip and to pretend that life was going on normally next week and next month, even down to, or up to such things as servants' holidays. I came home driving very fast to hear the six o'clock news. Neville Henderson had over an hour's talk with Hitler and three hours with the Ministers to-day.

* * *

It is coming. Evacuation is to begin. This must not be taken to mean that war is inevitable. That was the announcement. We all weighed the words. In a crisis words may be used to delay understanding. Evacuation could only mean: (1) the worst; (2) a measure of precaution; (3) a gesture to impress Germany with our determination. Two to one. Yet nothing could lighten that heavy feeling which we all shared. It was like listening to the undertones of thunder coming nearer and nearer.

* * *

September

To-day on the ten-thirty news bulletin: Germany has attacked Poland. This is war. Counted blankets for evacuees. Looked out material for darkening windows.

* * *

An unreal kind of day. One actually misses the acuteness of suspense. War is here; with us now, although not yet declared. Endless activity preparing for evacuees. The only question we ask each other is 'What's the news?' But the news is vague and the bombing of Polish towns seems hardly more real to us than the Japanese and Spanish atrocities on which we have been spoon-fed for these last few years. All the time 'It' is coming nearer by inches and minutes. The garage where I stopped for petrol says that petrol ration-cards are already out. We have introduced a conscription bill. Is it going to be a horror of months or of years? In any case we 'down here' will be a refuge for many. We must keep our sanity; and our cheerful-

ness; inoculate ourselves against the mentality of war-fever. So many patriots have that mentality but there must be oases of serenity somewhere. *The Times Literary Supplement* has a fine article about carrying on ordinary life and keeping alive spiritual values.

* * *

The first Sunday in September, a day spent meeting and cancelling those phantom evacuees and listening to bulletins. 'Down here. Down here.' The words are in my mind like clanging bell notes. So far from the centre, so useless. What can we do to help? We must fight this restlessness. Switching on the wireless every hour for news. What can any news bring now? No hopes of reprieve nor hopes of peace. We are at war. The news for weeks or months or years to come can only be news of destruction and of death. The world tragedy weighs heavy on us now but the individual sorrows are yet to come. It is like a great tide advancing but it has not yet filled the remote creeks and corners. The whole thing seems strangely far away. No one among our friends and relatives has been killed yet and therefore it all seems like a thing on paper.

Felicity P. was silent among the women at the station. Her 1914 place in the Ministry office in London is ready for her but her nervy husband, a strapping great man who grows annuals in his garden, can he be left? 'He's in an awful state of nerves,' she told me, 'and he scolds me for being so calm.'

* * *

Endless day, listening to a bulletin or waiting for the next one or weeding in the garden. Desperate need for activity. Is it hysteria or war-fever? Or a conviction that in this tug-of-war we must all put our weight on the rope. I do not know; but I went round with the gardener, pencil, note-book and seed-list in hand.

'You'll be all right,' he said, in answer to my remark that we must plan for the war. 'I shall be looking after you all.'

I thought he referred to his being too old to be called up but it appeared that his mind was on air-raids. He is Gas-mask Warden for the village and his faith in himself and, presumably, in Providence, is unshadowed. We agreed to give up all work

on flowers and to increase our crops of carrots, lettuces, onions, cabbage and turnips. Vegetables were now to come first, maintenance of small fruit and picking of apples next. In looking ahead today we shall not say what we said in 1914: 'The war cannot last long. No one could stand it.'

The King's broadcast was very simple and sincere, in a slow, sad voice, rather moving. It somehow renewed one's faith in quiet honesty that makes no arrogant claims nor any selfish ones and no display.

Strangely enough this feeling of certainty is almost a rest. War is with us now, nothing can avert it. Suspense is more exhausting than any other form of trouble. We learned that in November, 1914, when H.M.S. *Monmouth* went down fighting, with all hands; and it was a week before the death-knell telegram came from the Admiralty. A few days ago when war hung on a thread it was like watching the sands of an hour-glass run out. Every small concern was paralysed. To-day people are swinging back to normality, there were letters in the post, the last few days there had been none. Everyone is making plans now, taking up their war-time stations or inciting others to do so.

* * *

War mentality is on the increase. I am frightened at my own. I find myself longing for news of our attacks on Germany, of air raids on Berlin, of the sinking of German ships; longing for the death, by our own violence, of many hundred even many thousand human beings. But there are only rumours and contradictions of rumours. Life will be nerve-racking if these incessant news bulletins are given us every hour. To-day there has been better arrangement on the wireless and one does not have to listen to everything each time, they announce at the beginning if it is going to be recapitulation only.

* * *

It is hard to keep still for a moment. There is a contagious feeling that in every moment of each day we should be doing something active to 'help the war,' or, in plain language to promote and intensify this world massacre on which the nations and the individuals in our crazy world are all intent.

To-day I fought the onset of this war fever and went down to the river and spent an hour in the sunshine catching prawns. 'Food for the country,' I said to myself, 'every home-grown or home-caught meal means more imported food for other people.' And then I laughed at my own self-persuasion. And then I enjoyed the scene; white clouds, blue sky, deep green trees and peace down there by the river; no noise; how far away from trouble. Somehow, some day, one has got to find a reason for all this. Perhaps if our spiritual selves were more highly developed we should look down on this world of misery and mutilation and death and destruction as hardly more important than the struggles of those prawns as I put them in the bag. But the body is too close a prison for one to attain that view.

* * *

That order of Hitler, given when the first casualty lists were published, the order to wear no mourning and not to speak of personal losses, surely this is more than flesh and blood can bear.

* * *

Our quiet lives are utterly changed. Many thousands have now no personal life at all. It is as if an unseen hand had swept all that away as one sweeps away a cobweb, leaving no pattern nor even any strands of grey material. It is fallen into dust and that dust is carried away on the wind. Whither? We do not know. This work of unseen forces has been thorough and the change in our daily habits is but a symbol of the change within our minds. All through the day the staircase landing is in twilight for sacks have been placed on the skylight, lest men of murderous intent, living many hundred miles away, should fly into the air above us, the free air that never has been a niggard or partisan, and drop a bomb that will break our walls asunder and shatter the life out of our bodies. And this without so much warning courtesy as that of a highwayman's 'Stand and deliver.' Every road has strange white markings, attempted safeguard for those who must move at night, groping their way without a light. Our newspapers hold only half the accustomed number of sheets and our daily post has

only letters of immediate import. Plans arranged last month, last spring, last year, cancel themselves without notice given or taken on either side. Newspaper and wireless war news are become the highlights of each day. It is as if one had a constricted throat and each item of war news gave one power to swallow more easily for a moment and then at once the pressure of pain closed down again. With each evening comes panic about chinks of light showing. One can no longer read oneself to sleep for there are always windows and shutters to be opened at the moment of drowsiness. Then one has awful dreams. And all the while from friends and neighbours come tales of business ruined and careers cut short and forebodings about the coming attack on the Siegfried Line and the casualty lists and their meaning to flesh and blood and hope and love and spirit. In the garden nothing is changed in these few weeks except that a little tang of autumn has crept into the air.

* * *

A black hour listening to Hitler's speech at Danzig. Something about that angry voice is ruthless and terrible, beyond the bounds of sanity; and then the awful threat of the 'unknown weapon' reported next day. Hard to dispel black fear at that threat, with the cruel voice still echoing in our ears. I went to the Old Landlord with my fears and he took it casually. 'Some poison gas or other,' he said. I knew by the tone of his voice that fear must not be admitted into our minds, that all threats must be taken lightly, the only things that must not be casual are our own hopes, our own courage, our own calmness of mind.

There are moments, thinking about Russia, when hope dies down and one feels a great evil force coming slowly, steamroller fashion, over the world. One of the most frightful things about these days is that everyone is losing the habit of happiness or the capacity for feeling it. Hope is elusive, it comes in flashes. It ebbs, or evaporates, or thins out in dilution every time that one thinks of the vast power of evil now let loose upon the world, every time that one dwells on what may happen beyond the next moves of Russia, Turkey, Italy. What

can we do down here to oppose that evil? Some of us do not believe in prayer. Some do. Most of us at any rate cherish a belief that if one tries to keep alive hope and faith, and a measure of real charity or love in one's private live, that effort will swell the rising tide of rightness and goodness. Those who have found an active way of helping their country are lucky, their activities will, of course, win the war. But it is the other part of our being, of our lives, that alone can win lasting peace.

* * *

Here we cannot push and pull and interfere to help the war forward, so we just question each other endlessly. Why on earth don't we make a smashing raid on the Germans that are massing behind the Siegfried Line? Or on their railway junctions? Why does Hitler delay his offensive on the Western Front? Why has he not yet raided London? And so on, and so on, but there are never any answers for all of us are asking the same questions at once. It is hard to reconcile oneself to comparative inactivity when the whole world is in a ferment. In the effort to do so a certain routine of physical work can help a little. I find comfort in chopping up firewood and in sweeping leaves into heaps for the leaf-mould of the future. Numberless members of anti-aircraft and A.R.P. organizations are standing by to deal with the air raids that have not taken place, eating out their hearts in the bitterness of idle days, but they at least are filling an appointed niche. What can we do here? *Il faut cultiver son jardin*. Self-persuasion again. Grow more food.

* * *

Escape! Escape! This desperate longing to escape from one's everyday self into the world of that other self which tries, and fails so often, to say to the body: 'Be quiet. Lay your claims aside.' But I really did escape last night, for one short moonlit hour, running in those fields above the river. All alone with the sky, the earth, the moonlit path across the water, a path that was not quite gold and yet was deeper than silver. And the cold north wind was blowing from lands that were already held in winter's power. It was a mood of despair that drove me out, a longing to get away from our insistent world into new country. And I found the new country, for all the known fields

were strange in the light of the moon and when I started running there I went on and on into this undiscovered world that was my own. There was ecstasy in such movement, alone with the moonshine and the cold wind in my face and the quiet silver river below. At that moment I wished for nothing better than to be running onward thus for ever.

11

REPERCUSSIONS

The war acted as a touchstone and under the impact of war conditions many of the neighbours revealed strange aspects of their familiar selves. Or had they never really been familiar?

Had we ever, for example, suspected venom in the thoughts of Miss Lugg the grocer during those evening moments when she pulled off her sagging stockings and emptied her pockets of cheese? Or it may be that she never did empty her pockets, for always when she stood behind the counter she smelt of cheese, mousetrap cheese and not very fresh at that. In the old days, now so rapidly becoming crystallized in thought into the "good old days," there was none so free as Miss Lugg with overweight of sweets for children and a "Dear" for every customer. Now her language about the Germans was worse than violent and, in the tortures she ill-wished on Hitler when she went to bed each night, she betrayed all the inventive powers of a malevolent and cruel witch.

Or had we ever known what lay behind the ruminating, inscrutable face of William-John the cowman? To and fro he went across the lonely fields to his work in this lonely country, carrying his gas-mask because he had been told to do so; he carried it wrapped in a white duster, knotted at the corners, and when asked about it he would say defiantly: "I aan't takin no notice of this old war, it doan't worry me but I'm ready to help if they d'want me." "They" stands, no doubt, in his mind for his country.

Had we ever guessed what heroism lurked in the soul of the chinless postman Robbie, until he came home crippled and decorated? Or had we for one moment thought it possible that the meek Penelope could become a virago without warning, that certain brawny and cocksure men would fall in with the ranks of the Jitterers as if that were their natural place and that mild

little women would become, overnight as it were, tough and seasoned heroines in their daily shouldering of new burdens?

All these and many other things happened beside the Helford river in the days of the war, making one aware that each human being is doomed to walk from cradle to grave with a mask on his face. "What heart knows another, ah! who knows his own?" as the poet said.

One day early in that first autumn I drove in to the town for shopping and met C.T.S., the reviewer for *Punch*, the most endearing of our neighbours. He was everybody's friend and had collected crowsfeet round his eyes in over seventy years of smiling.

"Can't you find me a job?" he asked, and there was no smile on his face, only a desperate look of anxiety. "I can't do coast-guard work as I did in the last war," he added. "I'm in here buying stuff to darken windows."

It appeared that his landlady was too busy to attend to such things and that he had been struggling to paste brown paper on windows that overlooked the sea. Now he had bought twenty-two yards of black material; he thought it best to buy that quantity because it was the length of a cricket pitch.

"Can't you find me a job?" he repeated in a tone of agitation.

"We're in the same boat," I answered. "I'm only waiting for evacuees. The old and middle-aged ones down here have nothing to do but wait and see what turns up. And keep smiling, I suppose," I added, as I looked at his crowsfeet.

Half an hour later I overtook him walking home and he refused a lift because he had nothing to do but walk. I thought of the drilled German patriots, their *Deutschland über alles*, their posturing and shouting. C.T.S. did not even raise his voice and I feel sure that he had never posed nor postured in his life but his whole bearing was expressive of one thought only: "What can I do for my country?"

No; it was not among the seventy-year-olds that the Jitterers appeared. They were to be found among middle-aged critics and cynics who had talked their way through the years without enough action to serve as ballast. We had a perfect specimen not far from our village. On the outbreak of war he assumed a

gloomy look and tone, with a defeatist attitude, although his income was assured and he had no close friends nor relatives in the front line of service. He had no occupation of any sort and spent much time writing letters to tell his friends that he was "shattered." He would stop acquaintances on the road as he was exercising his bull-dog, assuring them that "this awful war was the end of all one stood and hoped for." He had always felt that to say "one" instead of "I" added dignity to his sentiments. He would lament the "wretchedness of being immobile" because "this time" he was over serving age. Some of us remembered "last time" when he was, to all intents and purposes, immobile, being then, as now, a mere bundle of nerves.

I could not resist reporting these roadside activities to the Old Landlord, who soon found occasion for an interview. What he said to the Jitterer no one ever knew but from that day he changed his tune into one of exuberant patriotism and optimism that nearly made us all sick.

One of the minor repercussions among us was the fact that one day I found myself, at an age when immobility and stiffness would naturally have been setting in, once more after many years astride a pony; jogging many miles to see Felicity, travelling thus in order to save petrol.

It was good to look over the hedges into quiet fields and valleys. All the leaves were still, the sky was mother-of-pearl, the hollows were full of autumn colour. There were tawny slopes of bracken lit here and there to gold, russet and yellow tree-tops, not leafless yet but thinning at each crest, so that in every wood I saw one stem behind another, like pillars of a temple; and always at the lower end of each valley there shone a steel-blue line where the river pushed an arm among fields and trees.

When Felicity, having taken the saddle off Peter and turned him into the field, settled me in an arm-chair with sloe-gin and coffee at my elbow, for a few moments I forgot the war. Felicity and Ned were comparative newcomers in Little Tolverne. That is the name by which I choose to call their home but, like one or two other places named in these pages, it will not be found on the map. I had a burning hope that they would settle there.

"Have you found any good neighbours yet?" I asked her,

raising my sloe-gin, ruby-coloured in an old-gold liqueur glass, towards the window. "There are some things that even Hitler cannot spoil," I thought, as I sipped my drink and watched those two colours drawing in and holding the light.

"The people of Tol," she replied, "can count and they know their own names. That is all."

She has a caressing, tired voice and never wastes a word. She considers that the village is not worthy of a double name so she always speaks of it as "Tol," in a tone of infinite contempt. Presently she warmed up to local topics.

"I'm finding out about them gradually," she said. "I went in to Great Tolverne to change my books and entered the library with one of our neighbours, a scarlet-faced man all legs and arms; he was carrying books in a strap and walking sideways so I nipped ahead and said to the girl librarian: 'What's the name of your customer who looks like an intoxicated lobster?' A shadow fell on the counter. The lobster stood beside me. The girl opened a ledger, pushed it towards me and laid her finger below the name: 'Colonel Ruddygore.' There is some intelligence in Great Tolverne. None here."

"Why," I said, "you make out these people are like the ones who voted the earth was flat."

"They couldn't vote," she assured me. "Don't know how. There was a meeting to discuss the evacuees who haven't come. Miss Ponsongath was in the chair, stone-deaf these forty years. They put me on the platform beside her because Ned has eleven windows to this house. Terrible snobs in Tol. Someone said to the chairwoman: 'What is our chance of getting evacuees?' She replied: 'The dark stuff they sent is an inch too short.' Then I enquired if the mothers were still expected as well as expectant and Miss Ponsongath answered: 'Did you know my nephew Willie has got his commission?' And that's our leading light in Tol."

"Oh yes," she went on, "they all like her, I grant you that, they like her name too. She's no vices and no malice; but as chairman! We got on to the question of working parties and someone rather less mental than the others was pushed forward to take charge but they can't vote, as I told you, they just

muddled on and when they shouted 'Mrs. Loam' because it's a nice easy name, Miss Ponsongath said: 'Of course I'll run it for you, you'll all come up to Ponsongath to work and I'll see about the materials.' So now they don't know who's in command, the pushed one or Mrs. Loam or Miss Ponsongath. They aren't really sure in the village if there is a war on."

Finally I got on to the subject of her London job; Ned had agreed to her departure. It seemed that the change in his attitude had been effected by two letters, one from the Old Landlord, saying how proud he must be of his wife for taking up her old work and placing her talents at the service of the country and the other a dictatorial letter from their son, adjuring his mother to stay at home.

On leaving Felicity I stopped at the village shop for yeast. One of the results of the war was that our own grocer no longer brought our yeast, we got it where and when we could. Leaving Peter tied to the village pump, I entered to find the place in full conclave. A fat man seated on a barrel with arms akimbo shouted my order over his shoulder to a shadow in a dim corner. The shop smelt of herrings and cheese and sawdust.

"Two-pennorth o barm Liza-Jane!" he cried.

Then he continued his comments on the war, addressing them to a chorus of women grouped around him.

"That theare Itler," he said, "I reckon e d'knaw e's knacked an ef e d'venture into France e'll cop ut proper."

A murmur of approval greeted this remark and then the bell on the lower half of the door tinkled as a fat woman came in.

"Why lor-a-mussy-me Missus Pill," said the leader of the feminine chorus, "whatever ave ee bin an gone an done weth your gas-mask?"

"I ain't got nawn," she replied, wheezing heavily, "I'm nawn too good in me breath anywise an I'd reather fer to take me chance. I cudden never breathe in they contraptions."

As she plumped herself down on a stool the bell tinkled again and a tall scrawny woman came in, casting furtive glances to right and left and hugging under one arm a small, nearly square box.

"Why Missus Rescrowla," said the prophet from his barrel,

"why be ee carryin that for? Be ee expectin visitors?" and he jerked his thumb upwards in the direction of the sky.

She snorted indignantly. "Coorse not," she said, "I doan't worry bout this oal war. Tedden nawthen t'me. But they toald us ef we went to town we belong take our gas-box weth us an as I was comin down Churchtown for two pennorth o barm I sez t'meself: 'Better safe than sorry.' And th'oal box dedden cost me nawthen."

I jogged home in slow contentment, enjoying the long evening, while the light ebbed imperceptibly from tree-top, hedgerow and horizon. Now that Hitler has made everything, even the mere act of living, so expensive, we are saving here and there and everywhere and we have even filched an hour every evening from Time. But Time's revenges are proverbial.

Little Tolverne was by no means unique among the Helford villages and if war does evoke, as some believe, high qualities and heroism in mankind, we, in those first years of war, were certainly not "Evokees." Many had the dimmest notion as to what the war was and even where it was, and not one of us could peer into the future and guess how "this here war" would change the face of our world and the manner of our lives. There was a lad who came to our local War Agricultural Representative and asked for permission to stay at home and work on his father's farm. "I doan't want to go to this eare war," he said. "What war do you mean?" asked the W.A.R., who was interested in exploring the depth of rural ignorance "Why," rejoined the lad, "the war same as is going on in Falmouth. I seen the soldiers there last Saturday."

Even among the more educated people, high qualities were not invariably or immediately in evidence. One of my friends used to go about saying: "Don't be too kind to anyone. It doesn't pay." She did not expose the roots of this cynical creed but we guessed that they had some connection with certain dirty and pub-addicted evacuees who had returned hastily to the place whence they came.

Another of my friends broke down, or broke up, completely, at an early stage of the war. It was not a matter of nerves nor of acute personal anxiety, she just went morally to pieces, like a

wrecked man in a boat who steals the last cup of water. The war had not hit her hard, most of her friends and family were serving but few were in the danger line. Her way of living had not undergone any drastic change and such work as she was able to do for the country was being done in her own home, at her own time, since it was concerned with increased production of eggs and vegetables. All the same there was a most terrible change in her mind, a change not easily defined. First I noticed that she was hoarding food, as if starvation were already knocking at the door. Then she became incredibly stingy in small ways. Finally I had the impression that she would, if she found herself in a burning building, fight her way out to safety over the fallen bodies of those around her. I cannot tell what gave me this impression, or I will not tell; speaking generally it was her attitude to money. She seemed to have lost all generosity of heart and to have got into some dark place on the edge of panic, where the spirit of grabbing selfishness had become entangled with the need for personal survival; she could not separate the two in her mind.

Yet there were many who would talk quite calmly about their business ruined in a day, their career collapsed like a fallen castle of cards, their income halved or lost overnight, but nearly always they would take such things quietly, without much comment except to say: "Well, we must carry on." We can have little doubt, as we look back now on those days, that it was the spirit of "We must carry on" which knit the nation together and won the war.

Although there was this general attitude of calmness about personal loss, there was no calmness in the countryside where rumours were concerned. The Helford river was like a sounding-board for the spreading of rumours. Many of them were fantastic. There were two submarines bottled up in the harbour six miles away, German submarines that had taken refuge there, they might blow up the whole county at any moment. There were also ten oil tankers, or possibly sixteen, or very likely twenty-three, caught by us and taken into the same harbour. The *Bremen* was lying in the river above the harbour, having taken shelter beneath the beech trees. The maternal evacuees of one town were so dirty that they had to call out the fire brigade and turn the hose on

them; since when the river had silted up. In one village where the child evacuees were well and happy the teachers were so full of grumbles that there was going to be a return of the school to London. In many places whole families were returning home because they missed the pub round the corner.

One true story about a Londoner cheered us greatly and we needed cheering, for there was not, at that time, much humour in the stories that were passed around. It was Sam Bojerrow who accosted me in the market-place and told me all his family news.

"A pretty play-up we've had down my plaace," he said, "an Christmas time an all. Me darter up Lunnon she wroate as how she wur comin home an bringin a friend an how the friend must come down to the country because she wur a Suspected Mother. Well, darn ee, soon's ever the friend had gone up over stairs I sez to Mother, I sez, 'Mother, you watch that theare young woman, I reckon she be goin t'calvey.' Well I observed the young woman for a day or two an waun night I seed a light in her room at eleven o'clock an I sez to the wife, 'Darn ee Mother, you go long an see for that young woman. I reckon she's goin t'calvey t'waunce.' My missus she come back an she sez t'me, 'Samuel,' she sez, 'you must fit an get the car an drive her in Penalewy.' 'Darn ee Mother,' I sez, 'I aant goin alone along o she. Why whatever should I do? You've got to come too.' So my missus and the young person got in the car an we started off for to drive her in Penalewy. But when we come to Tregiskie corner, theare was a gurt soldier doin sentry weth baynet an what-all an he stopped us an sez: 'Where be gawin to? Where be come from? What be doin av? Where be livin?' E cudden a axed more questions, naw, not ef I was a German an then e started lookin inside the car an then e began to ax more questions an who we was an how many we was an I sez to un, a bit sharp like, 'Darn ee boy,' I sez, 'we be three o us now but ef you d'keep axin more questions we'll be four an only yourself to blame.' "

I liked Sam's story because it was realistic, all the words led up to action. We all talked so much piffle about the war, vague theories and thoughts and self-questioning preyed on our minds as we waited and waited for the greater shocks that were so

slow in coming. One day Virginia blew in. I had always wondered why the Creator gave her human form, she ought to have been a bit of thistledown, or spume blown from a wave; yet how beautiful she is. She put her head on one side and said: "I suppose it's very dreadful of me but I feel just as bad when I read about a German boat being sunk as when I read about our own." I said gruffly: "What's far more awful is that I find myself searching the papers for Big News and longing for our western offensive to begin so as to help those Poles."

What queer states of mind, Virginia pretending to censure her own humanity, myself pretending to censure my inhumanity. Felicity always declared that if Hitler arrived in our village with his army, Virginia would open her door and greet him with: "Oh my poor sweet, you must be tired after your long journey, come in an I'll make you a good cup of tea." Yet Virginia has no vices except that she uses too many "poor sweets" in her everyday speech.

The trouble is, of course, that we all have a craving for action, We have not enough to do down here, we cannot find anything to do that will help to speed up war and bring peace. How I envied Felicity who was going off to a job at the heart of things, not foreseeing that in a short while I myself would be off and away, moving "up-country" to work for the W.V.S. in a large town where, for several long, over-crowded, nostalgic years, I was to endure separation from the Helford river.

When Felicity came to say good-bye it was a red-letter day, for since the rationing of petrol came in she had seldom been to see me. Ned, she reported, was resigned, but not enthusiastic. Her visit was all too short. She is one of those people in whom much is implicit and when she comes one is always going to wander in talk with her around all the things in heaven or earth that really matter. One never does of course. One remains always on the edge of things that really matter but this gives a flavour and piquancy to intercourse. Perhaps such implicit relationships are the best of all, they are so full of faith and hope and illusion and beautiful unfulfilled journeyings; journeyings of the thoughts and emotions.

The District Nurse came just as we had embarked on one of

these voyages; she was cheerful, tireless and loquacious as ever when she arrived for her weekly bath and weekly chat. We three discussed, I remember, the sinking of H.M.S. *Courageous*, a subject which was filling all our minds.

"Silly I call it," said the Nurse. "Silly of that captain to stand on the bridge and get drowned when he might have saved his life. I've no patience with him."

I had a sudden sense of the lifelong discipline of spirit which that man must have imposed on himself, nothing else could have helped him to face such a moment in such a way. To feel the ship sinking slowly under your feet, to know you had done all that was possible to save your men, to watch the waters coming nearer and to sense with every nerve in your system that in another moment you will be drawn down into that dark water never to come up again; surely flesh and blood would cry out and command him to take his last chance, to fling himself into the sea and make for the boats. Thoughts of his family, his career, his own power to help his country would be racing through his mind to reinforce that claim of flesh and blood. But he stood on deck at the salute and went down with his ship. When reading the obituary notices one pictured him as a fine fellow, one who shone in all the ordinary, pleasant ways of life and kept implicit the heroic qualities within him. Only his naval friends would understand that love for his ship and his duty which was part of his very soul.

Strange how that word "implicit" was haunting me to-day. These thoughts had passed through my mind in a single flash. I returned to my two companions, intending to try and tell them how I saw the whole picture but Felicity was already answering the Nurse.

"It was naval etiquette," she said.

Then she got up, said good-bye briefly and went out of my life to her job.

12

THE SPOONBILL

When the war was ended I came home to find many changes in the district but none in the surface or the contours of the river.

The Old Landlord was dead.

He had lost faith in the rolling stone who might have been his heir and had left everything, absolutely, to his wife. All the neighbours agreed that the Shadow had done her best. There had been no break in tradition; the old employees remained in their places; the Mansion and garden, once freed from army occupation, were freely lent for every kind of "occasion" as before; the estate mortgages were reduced and finally cleared. But of course a light had gone from our world.

Kimiel Pendragon also was dead and Maria carried on her life in the wood, a little less gay perhaps but without any loss of courage.

The unremitting changes of the seasons, the promise of spring and fruition of summer, autumn's glory and decay, winter's austerity and repose, all these brought reassurance in a world that was changed completely. There were also the birds, untouched by war. Winter after winter while bombs fell and the great guns thundered over Europe, migrants had come down from the north to the Helford. Summer after summer the music of swans' wings and the needle-sharp cry of the kingfisher had sounded from shore to shore while some of us were far away and could not hear them.

Now, on our return home, we were faced with new necessities in the mere routine of living; difficulties occasioned by rationed food and petrol, scarcity of this and that, queues and overcrowding all this seemed to press down on our everyday existence like a ceiling that is far too low. Only in watching birds beside the river could I escape from all those things and from the incessant work that had become habitual. The south shore of the river from Gweek to Frenchman's Pill remained the property of the

Shadow, dedicated without formality or charter to the safety of birds and the serenity of man. I had always been in the habit of taking my troubles to the river and returning with a calm mind and now a certain measure of calmness was still to be found there.

There was no need, as one sat beside the river, to withdraw one's senses from activity and go into a trance. Serenity could be attained by regarding the quiet, almost imperceptible movements of this living world as events worthy of a man's full attention for a whole long day. There would be slow movements of the tide with its narrow line of blue water becoming after a while a great sea-pool, or its wide reach of blue water giving place reluctantly to brown mud; drifting or driven clouds above Merthen woods, like galleons cruising in an unexplored element to an unknown destination; the shadow-like flick of a rabbit scuttling from its grass feeding-ground into undergrowth of furze and blackthorn; the deliberate progress across a field of munching, ruminative cows; and, above all, the movements of the river-haunting birds. Sometimes there are quick, unexpected movements, leaving a "whence-whither" question in one's mind, the flash of a kingfisher out from the secrecy of an overhanging bank, the sudden dive of a cormorant after many to and fro cruising movements, an inverted snowstorm with the uprising, from mud flats, of many hundred gulls into the air, the heavy flapping of a heron tired of his vigil on the margin of the water, the overhead flight of ducks and curlews and, in winter, of green plover.

There are the sounds also; the sad piping of that solitary redshank, the celibate of Vellan Tremayne and the choral piping of his fellow birds along the river; the raucous croak of herons, the nostalgic cry of curlews and the babel of congregated gulls.

Whenever a hard winter came to the west, ducks would arrive in their hundreds from the north, ducks of many varieties and sometimes small flocks of geese. Then shooting men would come up stealthily in boats from the mouth of the river, creeping under the banks and shots would ring out and the geese and ducks would rise in a cloud, flying high with restless, unhappy movements. After a day or two of such persecution the geese would

depart. The ducks might stay a little longer but they also would go back to their northern feeding-places as soon as the weather softened.

The Old Landlord, for all his devotion to birds, had never in his old age been able to protect the geese. Had he been mobile he would have pursued those shooting men, would have taken his own boat and lain in wait for them and appeared suddenly as they were creeping up river, would have scattered the geese with deliberately noisy movements and told the men what he thought of those who murdered rare birds; he would have withered those marauders into silence with his scorching words.

Even in a winter of normal mildness unusual birds might be seen on or near the Helford river, indeed the whole Lizard peninsula is subject to visits from strange migrants. On the mud flats a merganser, a godwit, a knot or a smew might drop in, with or without a mate, stay for a while and depart as mysteriously as it came. Snow-buntings, Pomatorhine skuas and siskins are among the birds seen within the last twenty years in various parts of the river's hinterland. Most beautiful and strange of all our visitors is the great northern diver, who may be seen in any average winter on the broader parts of the river. It is absorbing to watch this bird with his speckled plumage and long body flat like a barge on the water and to contrast his movements with those of the cormorant, who will dive suddenly, quick as thought, with an impetuous jerk as if he were trying to bring his tail over his head. The diver will slip into the water with such silky smoothness that you can hardly detect the beginning or end of his motion, at one moment he is riding on the surface and then he is gone, leaving hardly a ripple.

River and shore birds are not, except for the dazzling kingfisher, a brilliant assembly, their plumage being mostly brown, grey, black, white or pied.

It is true that when seen close at hand the feathers of the shelduck, oyster-catcher, teal and widgeon do form a certain brilliancy of pattern but when seen from afar, outlined on mud or water, most of the ducks appear sombre while the chestnut-banded shelduck appears to be plain white. All the ducks and waders when seen flying far away against the sky appear to be

black, except some of the lesser waders that turn brown to silver and silver to brown as they catch or lose the light.

On the whole the water-birds and waders owe their charm less to individual brightness than to their ever-changing background of mud, sky and water, their flock formation and their musical cries. I would rather see the curved beaks of curlews or a V-shaped skein of ducks patterned on the sky, or a cloud of white seagulls rising from the mud and breaking up into single flakes, than I would see any bird of paradise or golden pheasant, any parrot or macaw.

For always these birds of shore and river are expressing in their wild cries, their continual change of feeding-ground and their swift, concerted movements, that quest for the unknown which is only half articulate in man. Always in watching these flocks of gulls, curlews, dunlin and sanderling as they follow or evade the movements of the tidal water, one must realize anew that the search of wandering spirits for something never yet found is reflected in their wheeling flight. Seldom, however, perhaps only once or twice in a lifetime, will the sight of a single bird bring a swift, stabbing recognition of that personal quest which is at once our own torment and lodestar. Such a recognition I experienced in that winter when the spoonbill appeared in our river.

You will find the appearance of this one spoonbill recorded in the annals of our Bird Society, recorded with precision as to the exact place, date, names of observers and details of the bird's plumage, which proved it to be not fully adult, but you will never find a record, not even in this account of the experience that I shall try to set down on paper, of the visions, the emotions and the memories evoked by the sight of that archaic and solitary bird.

To begin with, I had a sudden penetrating insight into the bird's loneliness. There he was, after heaven knows what far journeying from overseas, coming to rest in our west country tidal river without a single companion of his own species within his range. He was standing on the edge of the salt water channel, his dark elegant legs rising from the mud enabling him to stand inches higher than the congregated gulls; he was white as they were but he had an erect rather than a horizontal figure and he

had that incredible appendage, his long, spoon-shaped bill. Very stately and distinguished was his pose as he stood there, quiet and full of dignity in the light of that December morning, overlooking, by reason of his superior length in leg and the upright slant of his body, so many more yards of brown mud and blue channel than any other bird in his vicinity.

He made no restless, preening movements, nor did he utter any sound as he stood there like an image among the crying gulls and the wailing curlews and the piping redshanks. The onlooker could sense at once that he was a noble stranger come from afar.

We stood there, my nephew and his fiancé, on the main road, peering down through the coppice oaks with our field glasses, and the lorries rattled past and only three hundred yards away the white cottages at the head of the creek stood looking down at their own reflections in mud and water, and no one was aware that among all those birds massed on the margin of the river Peggy had discovered the presence of a spoonbill. Presently we moved on to the head of the tidal water, climbed a wall and went quietly forward over the boggy ground towards that spot where the birds were assembled. Nearer and nearer we came and every few minutes we would stop to put up our glasses and have another look at the spoonbill. He stood out clearly now, with a dark fallen log for background, so remarkable and exquisite in form that we began to wonder what sort of a flat, dull life had been ours before the coming of that bird. He filled our world completely.

As we drew near them the whole flock of gulls rose with a great clamour.

"Watch him!" exclaimed Pete, completely master of the situation and of himself, but a little hoarse with excitement, "watch him when he rises. I think he's a young bird, if he's got a black tip on each wing that will prove it."

Peggy and I were shaking with emotion as we saw him rise, we were both sinking slowly, already ankle-deep, into the mud, but far from our thoughts was any concern for our feet so long as we could keep our heads and our glasses steady. There was the spoonbill high in the air, flying towards the sun and as for black wing-tips or any details of his plumage, how could I remember

to observe such things when my whole being was drawn up and away from accustomed boundaries? For the silhouette of that bird was prehistoric. It took me back to things that I had forgotten to remember, lost now somewhere in the "dark backward and abyss of time."

So thin and narrow was the bird in flight, with his elongated neck and his preternaturally long bill, that it was as if his slender body projected a long white sword ahead of it. Often I had seen long-billed birds in flight, curlews, herons and pelicans, but this one surpassed them all in the strangeness of its outline and as for colour it seemed, in the clear sunlight, to be an ethereal ivory shade.

It was as if time had passed him over and left him, not centuries but millenniums behind and he had emerged on this bright winter morning to remind us of one who "pass'd the flaming bounds of place and time."

He was beyond our range of vision now, having winged his way, no doubt, to one of the lower reaches of the river; and how fitting it was, I thought, that in our last sight of such a royal bird we had seen him flying towards the sun. But that was not, after all, to be our last glimpse of the spoonbill.

We carried out our programme for the day and wandered far afield. I do believe that the two P's almost forgot their own approaching marriage in our day-long discussion of the spoonbill and other spoonbills that Pete had seen in other tidal rivers. We visited a camp that is named in ancient records, we walked up to high land whence we looked out over woodland and river to the sea-horizon. We explored side channels of the river and the old deserted quay and the valley of the hazels where we stood awhile in admiration of those venerable trees with writhing branches and ancestral stems. Then, as we turned for home, we realized that there was still an hour or so of daylight. Our thoughts were all turned in the same direction, there was no need for discussion as to how we should use that daylight.

"It's a falling tide," said Pete. "Where's the next mud-flat we can get to below the head of the river?"

"Just above and opposite the heronry," I told him.

"Back to the far bank then," he said, "and we must keep the sun behind us."

He drove us back at top speed. We came to a quiet and solitary place and we moved stealthily to our appointed field. There was not a human soul about and on either side of the main river were smaller channels running in among the trees. Already a large expanse of mud was bare. The heronry was five or six hundred yards away across the water, we could see several of last season's nests, like dark blots on the tracery of beech twigs. .On the brown flats little parties of ducks and curlews and many hundred gulls were already assembled. We took up our station in the field that is bordered by a cliff about fifteen feet high, commanding a view of the flats and then we began, inch by inch, to sweep the main channel and all the side ones with our glasses.

"There he is," said Pete. "By himself, in that small channel on the left. You can see three widgeon in his immediate foreground."

Pete was always accurate.

Peggy and I squatted on our heels to balance ourselves, for even on this second encounter the strange bird was endowed with power to shake us with emotion and we needed all our self-control to use our binoculars with steadiness. Pete, more scientifically-minded and richer in experience of strange birds, remained on his feet.

"Same spot of oil on the left scapular," he announced, "it's our same bird. You can see the black wing tips clearly now."

The tide was ebbing fast, more and more gulls came winging down from the head of the river and soon the main channel was no more than a winding narrow thread of water. Colour too was ebbing from the world, only the woods on the yonder shore assumed an ever darker shade, turning slowly from grey to brown. The sun was now behind our western trees, the mud was no longer shining, the water was no longer blue. Then, in this dull-hued little world of brownish mud and water enclosed by the silent woods, two forms of gleaming silver came suddenly down river, appearing round a bend of the channel, so dazzling in their whiteness that they outshone the plumage of those many hundred gulls, so dignified and stately in their slow progress that they took, for a moment, our attention from the spoonbill; but only for a moment.

Our bird had left his side channel that was now dried out to a mere groove in the mud and he was working up the main channel, keeping always on the margin of mud and water. To see him at work was a revelation of what gracefulness in industry can be. Moving quickly, with his long bill stretched out before him in the shallow water, he swept the bottom in search of his crustacean food, left right, left right, with the precision of a crossing-sweeper or a drilling soldier, and as he moved his bill his whole body swayed with it. We could have watched that repetitive movement for hours, so strange it was and so beautiful.

Often I had observed wild birds in search of food, had seen beaks tapping on trees, boring in grass, probing in mud, pecking on thistles or branches, but always with jerky movements. This bird also was quick like the others but there was something rhythmical, something calmly regulated and controlled about the movement of his body and we watched him in amazement.

Presently the spoonbill going up channel and the swans coming down would meet, already they were very near and the channel was narrow. Which would give way to the other? All three birds were on the same side. We held our breath and watched. The swans came slowly on with never a break in their smooth movement but they made a detour round the spoonbill. Our bird was king of the river.

It was time for the two P's to leave and we all turned regretfully away from the cliff edge and made our way back to their ancient car that had been left in the lane. Whether, on their homeward way, they talked of the spoonbill or of their wedding, I shall never know but I do know that as they settled themselves into Pete's old bone-shaker they were supremely contented with their day.

On the next afternoon I went down alone to that field opposite the heronry but I was careless in approach and as I took up my station on the cliff, much nearer the gulls than on the day before, the birds spied my moving figure through the fringe of oaks that overhung the river and many hundred gulls rose up from the mud flats, whirled for a moment like a snowstorm against the dark wood, then went winging their way down channel and were lost to sight. I squatted on a fallen bough and watched the mud margins. One little knot of birds remained, about a dozen great black-

backed gulls, standing on the off side of the channel very near the water's edge. I examined them with little hope, not daring to expect a miracle, or something very like a miracle, two days in succession.

Among those predatory, wicked-looking gulls I could see no sign of what I was looking for, a long neck and a long bill; but, with a sudden start I noticed one erect white body on stilt-like black legs, with head tucked back beneath a wing. It was undoubtedly a spoonbill fast asleep; and undoubtedly it was our spoonbill, for there on his left shoulder was a black oil mark no bigger than a mark left by a thumb.

I waited with what patience my mind could infuse into my body, waited with what the Yogis would call a "one-pointed" mentality, controlling myself into utter stillness and directing every thought and feeling into intense desire to see that bird in movement once again. But he stood there asleep without moving leg or wing or feather.

The minutes were slipping by and the light was ebbing fast. At last he stirred and as he untucked his head and opened his wings a little way, as if to shake off the stiffness of sleep, I could distinctly see a black tip on the wing that I was facing. Slowly and with great dignity he began to search the shallow water for food and once more I watched in a kind of trance that rhythmical movement of body and beak as he advanced up-river quite alone. The large gulls were no longer visible, they must have scattered while my gaze was riveted upon the spoonbill. The light was now so dim that his solitary form did not appear to be white, it had assumed a strangely transparent hue, as if it were wrought in pale grey metal outlined on the dark mud in the twilight.

I turned homeward with the satisfaction of one who has trodden Pisgah-heights, taking my way not along the beach but up through a high field that overlooked the mud flats and the heronry and a great stretch of the upper part of the river. Every now and then I turned and put up my field-glasses to scan the main channel and every time I did so, even when I was nearly a quarter of a mile away, I could see that solitary bird, ghost-like now in colour but already, in these two days, become familiar in outline.

He was moving up against the ebbing tide. The water was leaden-coloured now and the brown woods on the other side were almost black and the green had faded out of every field.

I had the wildly exhilarating sense of one admitted suddenly, without merit or introduction, into a new and magic world. Yet at the same time I knew it was an old, old world which I had entered, the world where nature hides her secrets. I knew now that sometimes she will reveal her secrets not only to the wise and the well-equipped but also to the reverent ignoramus.

13

ACROSS COUNTRY

Among the minor casualties of the war was my dinghy which, after having spent years in an outhouse, was now useless. Henceforward I would have to reach the woods of Merthen and Calamansac, the hazel grove, the camp and the deserted quay by road instead of by water, winding round the head of the river at Gweek and adding miles to the journey.

However, in those first months of peace, when each one of us was rebuilding a personal life with poor and insufficient materials, I had little leisure from work in garden and home and seldom could I escape to open country for a whole long day.

Was it many years or many centuries ago, that day when I had seen from my boat those seven silver kings, perched in their Merthen oak trees? Centuries, I thought, as I pushed my garden accounts into a pigeon-hole, summoned Deb from her book, collected food for two and locked the door behind us, setting forth with such a feeling of elation as I had not known for many years. The post-war arrival of Deb in my life had been like the finding, after long, long search, of a four-leaved clover. And now, for this one day, all the hedges, fields, woods and bogs, streams and beaches of the countryside were ours, there was no such thing as time or money, we were stepping out into absolute freedom and, at long last, I had a companion like-minded with myself; a companion with the same feelings about Cornwall, the same dislike of main roads, the same addiction to scrambling, climbing and plunging over obstacles in any country, forgetting the rights of private ownership.

To explain my sense of triumph at that particular moment I must go back many years.

I can hardly remember the time when, as children, we had not begun to walk or run across country, either to follow the hounds or to take part in a paper-chase, but there was always a purpose or an objective in crossing so many obstacles, the hedges, ditches,

ploughed fields, bogs and granite walls. In our Victorian childhood there was little spontaneous *joie de vivre*. We were brought up on courses set towards tangible or ponderable objectives, on *quid pro quo* and "something-to-show-for-it" ideas. We were never encouraged to skip like goats nor to hover like butterflies. When I discovered my own love of moving across country just in order to enjoy the feeling of being one with earth and sky, I would not for anything have betrayed such a feeling to the family. In due course I learned to employ pretexts, an interest in wild flowers or in birds, even in mosses or fungi. Yet always I took those walks alone.

Again and again through many years I found myself wondering with distress why my friends were so ill-adapted for moving about freely on this good earth with a proper disregard for main roads and footpaths. They were neither lame nor weak and I demanded little of them except energy, enthusiasm and willingness to follow me but not one of them possessed these three qualities.

There was dear Bumble, undaunted in spirit but fat and slow moving after she was sixty-five, so that often she would stick in a gap, unable to move forward or back until our paroxysms of laughter had died away. There was the faithful Amy in high-heeled shoes and fragile London hat, who once, long ago, followed me across eighty hedges in one day but that physical effort seemed to drain her of power to enjoy the beauty of the fields and the sky. There was also Prue, so small that she should have been active as a bird but even at the outset she was only moderately enthusiastic about walking across country, and being weak in one arm was unable to pull herself up the high hedges, and as I pushed and pulled at her I could almost overhear her feet pattering on pavements or her thoughts straying back to the fireside arm-chair. Then there was Rosemary, who would serenely drive me in her Chrysler at eighty miles an hour but had no liking for sitting down quietly in open country; yet once she did accompany me across several fields and remained in her fur coat, standing upright as a monolith on a cliff-edge from which I descended to take my naked dip on a sunny Christmas Day. "My teeth are chattering," was all she said when I came up

again, "let's go home to tea." Not must I forget Elfrida, tireless and determined but she had soft feet and would often become badly blistered after fifteen miles or so.

Later in life I learned to place less value on mere endurance and to seek first and foremost in a companion some mental response to my own passion for places that are wild and solitary. I was again doomed to disappointment. Foy, the best of comrades, would complacently regard a mountain summit without feeling any desire to climb to it; her thoughts were always wandering to other means of locomotion, boats and horses and pony jingles. Lettice had more toughness and energy than myself and was undeterred by bogs, undergrowth or crags, but on the other hand, during the tamer stages of any journey, she would punctuate our progress with too much small-talk.

Burnand could be almost perfect but, alas!, she was inconsistent, wild one day and tame the next and after a single night spent on the Irish hills with the ample-sheeted *Irish Times* for our blanket, she deserted me. She left me alone with the sheep and the heather and the stars on Windy Gap, while she went down the valley to a little square hotel with lamps and a hot supper and a bed.

Pomus too came very near perfection but unluckily she was an artist and on the most unlikely occasions she would suddenly draw her sketching block from her satchel with an abstracted look that I learned to recognize and respect.

"Look at those hens!" she exclaimed once, in a tone of ecstasy, as we were passing a squalid Irish cabin in the mountains.

We were bent double, battling against wind and rain and there was no shelter for many miles. The white cabin, perched among crags above us, presented its face to the gale. There were nine hens below it, pecking about the margin of the bog and apparently those bedraggled birds made a lovely pattern, affording to Pomus one of those "now-or-never" moments that will not be denied appropriate action. Pencil and block in hand, distrait, silent and very solemn, she was gazing at those fowls as if they were immortal spirits.

"The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown," I murmured below my

breath. She was seeing those barn-door fowls in such a light as that which transfigured the wheat-field for Traherne, nor would she emerge from her trance until she had built a bridge between that vision of the patterned hens among the rushes and her already sodden drawing-block. I sought protection from a small peat stack, only to find it rose on the lee side from a water-logged ditch, so I left it and remained standing on the mountain road, curved like a sickle, with my back to the wind, feeling humble as a shadow.

All this experience of walking companions I was remembering as, with that strange feeling of elation, I set out with Deb, carrying our lunch in a rucksack, for the far side of the river.

Whenever she comes to stay and we go walking together, we start with a sense of adventure, not knowing what beauty we may meet, hoping that soon we shall leave behind us not only roads and footpaths but also our common heritage, the adult's persistent awareness of an object's surface rather than its essence.

A child sits on the floor handling his square red brick and never again in life will he experience such immediate apprehension of redness and squareness. He does not lift his eyes above the table leg, he has no conscious picture of his own world, the gravel path beyond the door, the garden gate, the two green hedges that enclose the path of his perambulator to the village shop. He can only feel one thing at a time and as he rolls, or sits precariously, on the floor, now pursuing, now grasping that brick, his mind moves slowly from redness to squareness and back again. But you and I and other adult persons, setting out for Merthen or the Oxus river, habitually begin the journey bearing our consciousness of things seen that is like a garment muffling sensitivity.

Yet when Deb and I go wandering together across country we are always able sooner or later to discard that garment and then, buoyantly floating away from our personal hopes and fears, we achieve communication with the soul of a leaf, a bird, a tree, one berry or a blade of grass, a cloud, a river, the whole earth, or the whole sky.

On that happy morning we soon began to meet with the small adventures that we enjoy most deeply; a new light or shadow or colour on a well-known tract of country; a shy bird seen close

at hand; a wild flower that is rare or out of season. We stood for a moment in an open field, looking towards the woods beyond the river and beyond those woods to the granite quarries of Constantine and Seworgan that appeared to be sloping up to the sky. Turning north, then west, we could see the scattered farms of Wendron and then the rippled summit-line of those twin hills, Godolphin and Tregoning. Miles and miles of country were spread out before us within the semi-circular rim that touched the sky and all that land seemed intimate as one's own garden, one had no feeling that it was far away across the river.

"Why is that stretch of land always so beautiful?" I said to Deb, "and so satisfying?"

I need not have spoken for what Cornwall says to one of us it says to the other.

"It's stillness is like a poem," she said slowly. "It's there for always."

Walking on through lanes and fields we came into the valley that was rich with autumn tints of beech and bramble leaves, the low-slanting November sunshine had a tender, illuminative quality peculiar to the season. Suddenly we saw one grey-lichened branch of an oak lit to silver by a sunbeam; on it was perched a magpie and his white and irridescent purple-black plumage was glowing with the brightness of a jewel. We stood and gazed at him as if we had never seen such a bird before and indeed the thieving magpie of our everyday world had undergone a transformation.

A few hundred yards farther on we were aware of a flick on a tree stem, a flick more rapid than the swaying of any leaf shadow, a flick that must betoken the presence of a living, moving thing.

"It's a tree-creeper," I whispered, as we both froze into stillness in the act of stepping forward. The little mouse-like bird was spiralling up the bole of a sycamore with the spasmodic movements that are natural to a bird as gliding is to a snake and crawling is to a worm. I could see his white eye-streak, echo of the white on throat and breast, could watch him moving as nuthatches and woodpeckers move, like a fly on a wall, his curved tail serving him for a rudder.

With that irridescent light on the magpie, with that flick of

Prawning in Abraham's Bosom. From left to right:
C. C. Vyvyan, Lady H., Maria Pendragon.

one small brown bird on a tree stem, we had passed the barriers of our established world into some half forgotten ancient freedom. We moved on slowly, crossed the stream that goes burbling through Roseveare wood down to the salt water creek of Ponsantuel and then, standing beneath a vault of golden leafage, we were drawn out and away from our own selves to become a part of the water's music and the colour of the leaves and the beneficent, low-slanting sunlight. A motor bus passed by, rumbling down from the 1914 War Memorial and we came back, as with the snap of a lock, from that far journey.

Then we were following the road above the river and looking down through trees could see the mud flats dotted with birds, gulls white as snowflakes and curlews grey-brown as shadows. So we passed through Gweek, beautiful and self-contained as a flower, marking the head of the river. At last we were alone in a winding lane and then we came to fields without any footpath and hedges without any stiles, to the open country that we love.

We took our own line, over land where the properties of Merthen and Bonallack are interlocked in a strange pattern. We plunged through fields of turnips and long grass and soon our feet were soaked; we clawed over one earthy hedge after another and soon our clothes were muddy. When we came to the ancient camp the sun had gone behind the clouds for a few moments and all the world was dull and grey. Perhaps Merthen was not in lyrical mood that day, certainly it had little to say to us. Even when we looked beyond the mouth of the river to where there is only sea and air and sky, there was never a stir of memory or desire, the South Sea Islands were not calling us. It was cold sitting in that high place and we hurried down across fields to the shelter of the oak wood, setting our faces towards Groyne Point.

We crawled under the lowest strand of a barbed wire fence, drawing the rucksack after us and advanced into the wood, pushing aside each bramble that arched the overgrown track. Soon we were looking ahead into a network of grey and silver oak trees, all of them twisted, forming a labyrinthine pattern, and in a few moments the network of twigs and branches were like four walls about us, for we could see nothing else. The trees had swallowed us up.

We were in the heart of the wood, with our flitting thoughts and observing eyes no longer in perpetual action, we were only conscious, as every one of the oaks was conscious, of cold light filtering down through branches and the warm earth below, to which every proud stem in the forest was intimately attached.

Where had been the moment of transition, that mysterious, fleeting instant between Is and Is-not, that point of time between sound and silence, that point of space between a ship on the horizon or a friend waving good-bye at a corner, and the lonely sea, the empty road? What secrets might we learn if we could apprehend the moment of disappearance, could catch and hold that second when the last note of the orchestra falls into silence, that split second when the milk comes to the boil. All experience is, to a certain extent, a loss, for, so soon as we suffer it, we have lost that much of non-experience for ever, just as, when guilty, we never can recapture our lost innocence.

So we moved on through the trees in a silence deep as their own, for we had left our selves behind. A woodcock rose from brown leaves beside the path, there was no other bird stirring in the wood. Every now and then the scent of a fox came to us on the air. It seemed that every tree was intensifying the silence with its individual power and we, being one with the trees, would not profane that silence by even a whisper.

Presently, however, that network of twigs and branches became thinner, allowing glints of silver light to penetrate between one branch and another, then the trees ahead were outlined on water and the walls about us became half transparent, gradually falling away altogether, and we found ourselves on the shingle beach at Groyne Point with all the trees behind us. Looking down the river, greatly widened at this point of confluence of the two channels, we could see across the water on our left the White House of Calamansac and on our right the mouth of Frenchman's Pill. Far away in the distance Dennis Head and Toll Point seemed to be standing guard where the river lost itself in open sea. Not a soul was stirring in all those acres of woodland at our back, we were solitary as the look-out man who stands in the bows of the ship.

Meanwhile, having taken off our wet shoes and socks and

spread them in the sunlight which, on that autumn day, was giving out more light than warmth, we realized that our feet were very cold. East wind blew in to our beach from the sea with a chill breath. "A bonfire," we both said at the same moment and slipping on our shoes again we parted, Deb to collect driftwood from the shore, I to forage in the wood for kindling. I collected the kindling material with due thought and care. Dead fern I mistrust profoundly, with its sudden up-flare of transient flame and its shower of falling sparks on to the feather-weight ash of each burnt frond; dead fern will raise the hopes of every amateur but it is useless as foundation to a fire. Dead stems of nettles, the perfect material, were not to be found and for my next choice, dead bramble stems, I would have to go far back among the trees. There were a few branches of dead gorse, like fragile hedgehogs, whose prickles would crumble at a touch, but these, unless they were collected in quantity and pressed down firmly on the lighted match and its first few victims, will expire, like dead fern, in a shower of sparks. I remembered, from my Irish travels, the virtue of dry heather stems and skirting the low cliffs that border the Merthen shores, collected dry stems from the tufts of heather growing on the edge of the wood. Then I picked off twigs of oak that hung dead at the end of their own boughs, for a hanging twig is always dryer than one lying on the ground.

As I arrived on the beach again Deb came round a rock, her person almost hidden by the oak boughs and the wreckage that she carried. We had eaten our lunch at the camp and had buried our paper bags there and now we had in our pockets no vestige of paper except a square inch of cardboard produced by Deb, a return-half ticket from Chacewater to Goonhavern and Goonbell. I had never yet heard of anyone travelling to Goonhavern and Goonbell by rail and Deb was vague about the when and the why of the journey but to both of us our bonfire was so important that we felt sure the journey's purpose must have been to provide us with that ticket in our need.

The fire was laid, the ticket caught and held the flame for two seconds, long enough to ignite the fine heather stems, then the oak twigs played their part and the wreckage, more reluctant,

was in due course licked by flames. In ten minutes half an old lobster pot, the lid of a packing case and sundry fragments of cork had become a molten mass.

We found a wave-worn plank, washed ashore after unrecorded voyaging, wedged it sideways between stones collected into a pile and propped out wet shoes against it close to the fire. Then we hung our socks on the edge of the plank and sitting down on the shingle became mesmerized by the rhythm of the water that would advance a few inches up the beach only to retire with a low sound that never quite reached the status of a ripple. Soon, however, we found that if our toes were near the fire they were scorched and if we withdrew them they became painfully cold in the chill autumn air. So, determined to achieve perfect comfort, we fetched armfuls of dry bracken from the wood and then, sitting on the beach with our feet and legs encased in the crackling fern, with a pile of driftwood close beside us, we could feed those flames and take our hour of ease.

There we sat, between the flames and the water, in a silence broken only by the gentle lapping of the incoming tide, until the solitude was invaded by the appearance of some oyster-dredgers, vessels of a strange, primitive shape that went plying to and fro in the wide water between Calamansac farm and Frenchman's Pill. After a time they seemed to become part of the sea-scape and we could watch them idly as we might watch dragon-flies moving to and fro over a pond. There were no speed-boats nor pleasure-seekers in the scene, no human beings except our two unmoving selves and the men who plied to and fro in those antiquated boats.

Then, before we had begun to consider our wet foot-gear and the eight miles that lay between us and home, an unexpected thing happened. There came, drifting slowly up on the tide, a dinghy with a sail and a single man; nearer and nearer he came to our beach until, in leisurely fashion, he lowered the sail and began to fish but so slow were his movements that it seemed as if he were in a dream. I glanced across the channel between us and Treveador farm, so narrow that we could row over in less than five minutes; and Treveador was only three miles from home.

"Come," I said, and with one consent we rose and hurriedly put on our shoes and socks, scattered the burning sticks of the fire and sauntered to the water's edge, where we stood in what we hoped was a pathetic and suppliant attitude. But we did not speak a word. Often I have proved the value of silence for self-protection, discovery or even attack. On this occasion we found it was a perfect medium for begging a favour.

The elderly fisherman in his boat was now within speaking distance and it was he himself who made the offer. Our glances towards the other shore had been unmistakeable and the transit was arranged. All he asked was that, as he had a weak heart, we should row him across, and, as his luck was out to-day, that we should wish him success in his fishing.

Many an anxious glance we cast back towards him and his little boat, as we climbed the sloping fields from the other shore, but sad to relate there was never a sign of a tightened line or of moving hands and the last we saw of that lone figure was a silhouette on the water. We ourselves, however, were completely satisfied with our day. The Everest people, as we know, have to come back on their tracks, but for us lesser travellers, whether we go round the world or forth and back to our own village, there is only one fitting climax to a journey and this climax we had achieved.

We had found a different way home.

14

THE HAUNTED WOOD

"You exaggerate," Mrs. Nancegollan will surely say, if she ever reads this book, and if by any chance she gets as far as this chapter she will add, with a sniff that is almost a snort, "Pure imagination," as she puts it on the table and takes up the latest issue of *House and Garden*.

Mrs. Nancegollan is a legacy of the war. She sailed into our village and took anchor there, as one might say, during the bombing of London and now, under the protection of her late husband's name, she has assumed the status of a Cornish woman which, as we all know, can only be well and truly earned by twenty years of residence.

Although she is no reader she will always give a sweeping glance round my book-littered room, pick up a volume with a careless and yet, at the same time, a possessive air, and then make a single comment as if she had swallowed it whole and that was that. I do not mind her possessive air when the book is a P. G. Wodehouse or a factual tale of travel but I do mind very much if it should happen to be Shelley's poems or St. Augustine's *Confessions*, for then I feel as if she had caught me half undressed. I do not want Mrs. Nancegollan to have a chance of getting beneath my skin. When she has got a book in her hand, whether it be *The Loved Ones* or the *Koran*, she will always add, after making her single comment, "I can't *think* how you manage to read so many books. *I* never find time for reading nowadays."

Into that single word "nowadays" she will throw the suggestion of a studious past wherein she had read and sucked dry all the best books in the world and a strenuous present wherein she despises anyone who will steal time from the day's real work to sit under his own fig tree and read a book; also that she, and she alone, by personal endeavour now keeps our world rotating on its axis.

As for that little word "I," when she underlines it she can squash you as surely as if you were a slug beneath her foot.

That word is meant naturally to lie in the shadows. "I wish." "I hope." "I don't care." It is hardly visible as it shelters beneath the emotions of desire, yearning, nonchalance, it is a peg on which to hang awareness of the universe and any other peg would do as well. After all, there have been a million million "I's" at one time or another and that is what one feels when one listens to ordinary humble people. But Mrs. Nancegollan will often stamp like Rumpelstiltskin when she uses the word, wielding it like a weapon, attacking her listener with oblique reproach. When she says "*I* never get any time for reading now," I begin to wonder if my passion for books is a crime. She can make one feel a desperate spendthrift by merely saying "*I* can't afford this or that," and when she says "*I* never listen to my neighbours' talk," she seems to dub you and me and everyone else as malicious gossips.

Let nobody imagine that, because she declares she has no time for reading she is a slave to house-work. Much of her time is spent in social diversions, some of it in good works and the rest in enriching her mind with her neighbours' secrets. Often I have shivered as I heard her discussing love or praising the beauty of a sunset or watched her picking a flower as if it were her slave. If I had time to do so I would always hide my Shelleys and St. Augustines before her arrival. If I had any chance of success I would try to conceal from her this book on the Helford, for I know exactly what she will say when she reads what I have written about the little valleys that run down to the river. She will exclaim, as she puts down the book with a heavy touch of dismissal:

"I belong to this county. I know those valleys well, I have looked over the hedges and seen them scores of times. They are just bits of derelict land, no good for cultivation, some of them are fox coverts but only a fool would go into them on two feet. Beauty in useless old stones and decaying trees indeed! And as for badgers, everyone knows they are vermin. The main road is good enough for me, *I* wouldn't take my shoes and stockings into such places. This poor neighbour of mine is daft and it's sad she can't

find anything better to do than potter in waste places and then write nonsense about them. These writers, you know, they get into the habit of writing down things that aren't there, plain things aren't good enough for them and really to make a song and dance about our valleys, well, all I can say is "fiddlesticks!"

Do I exaggerate? Have I exaggerated Amos and Mrs. Bonanza and the strangeness of that wood? Very well then, with my exaggerations for company I will sweep a great space round me and sulk in the middle of it, like Edward Carpenter.

Is not the bloom on a plum, sunlight on a Scotch fir stem, the echo of a mountain avalanche, a storm at sea, each and every one of these an exaggeration of the static order of things? Is not laughter exaggeration of a smile, as love is of liking, running is of walking, and a mountain of a molehill? Exaggeration indeed! Where would a writer be without it? Where would be the beauty of life without it?

Do you remember that tale of Alphonse Daudet, *La Mule du Pape*, and how, without any use of superlatives, he exaggerates every detail of the story, his vision falling like a sunbeam into secret corners and lighting up things never seen before? How Tistel Vedene returned to Avignon after seven years and was placed in charge of the animal that he had ill-treated before he went away, the favourite mule of the Pope? How he wore a downy little beard that seemed to be made from the shavings of fine metal that fell from his father's engraving tool, how rumour said that the fingers of Queen Jeanne had sometimes played with that beard in Naples and how Monsieur Vedene had now the glorious, absent-minded look of men who have been loved by Queens? And how, to honour his country, he discarded his Neapolitan garments for a Provençal jacket laced with rose-pink, while his head-piece trembled with a great ibis-feather from the Camargue? How the mule wreaked vengeance on Tistel before the eyes of the Pope and the assembled crowd, with a single kick and how that kick was so terrible that the smoke of it was seen as far away as Pamperigouste, a whirlwind of white dust in which there fluttered one ibis feather, all that remained of the luckless Tistel Vedene?

How could Mrs. Nancegollan understand that a writer is no

mere copyist concerned with a flat picture, that he is ever seeking more breadth and depth and height in his vision of subjects and objects? Yet he always knows that light must fall on those subjects and objects from other worlds and must linger there for a moment before he himself can be liberated from everydayness into insight and eloquence.

Oh! no, I am not laying claim to insight and eloquence but I do know that light will sometimes fall from another world into this country of the Helford river and that, particularly in the most hidden valleys, a humble listener may hear strange things and come near to the undiscovered meaning of a world which we cannot measure with our machines.

The tale about one of these hidden valleys that I must try to put on record is not merely a story of things seen with human eyes or of mileage walked by human feet. As for the characters concerned, I have no doubt that if Mrs. Nancegollan were to question me about Amos and Mrs. Bonanza, she never would be satisfied with such information as I could give her. I can only affirm, to anyone who cares to listen and may possibly understand, that such things *do* happen beside our river.

It is a story of desecration. It has nothing to do with any Christian church nor with any temple erected in honour of a god, but since the dictionary avers that to desecrate means to deprive of a sacred character, we must without a doubt adjudge Mrs. Bonanza guilty. Personally, I am sure that the hidden valley with its grove of oaks and boulders was, until the coming of Mrs. Bonanza, a sacred place. And now—

I am not speaking, of course, to the prisoners of dogma. Surely a heathen altar may be a sacred place. Surely it is better to worship a heathen god than never to pay homage to anything above one's little self.

Every time you entered that grove it took your breath away. Beneath those trees there was a hush not of to-day nor yesterday, but of many centuries; and always when you came near a certain boulder, flat as a table and large as a dwellingroom, you would remove your shoes on a sudden impulse and would speak in a whisper or not speak at all. You would stand there rigid with stillness, listening. For what? I do not know.

Nor can I describe the place. I can only tell you that the way in which those oaks and the granite boulders were intergrown was, well, it was as if created things had overstepped the boundary of those laws which make and keep us individual and, in strange communion of wood and stone, were writhing back and back into some unremembered chaos before time was. We get that feeling in Cornwall sometimes. But we seldom speak about it to each other, and never when a foreigner is present.

Beyond that giant boulder, in a more open space overgrown by straggling elders, was a series of earthworks, a complete little town-place, with a hole for every back and every front door; this, so long as human memory could reach, had been the unmolested citadel of badgers, and those mysterious nocturnal creatures were in deep harmony with the spirit of the place. Whenever you sat for a while in that wood you would find yourself far away in time and space from the frets and problems that beset us here to-day.

Then Mrs. Bonanza arrived in the district from some outlandish part and acquired, as foreigners often do acquire, a sudden passion for Cornwall. She had a pile of money and when Farmer Boase scratched his head and told her he didn't belong to sell bits of his land, she over-rode him with the weight of her cash and he sold her the oak wood, the boulders, the badgers' earth and one neighbouring field. Sold them, mind you! He had forgotten that the spirit of the place was beyond the pale of mortal markets. She at once began her wicked work in the upper part of the wood, it was levelled for a house and terraced for a garden. She spent lavishly; on best wood for staircase and floors, granite porch, every modern gadget and device for the comfort of toil-shirkers. The garden—I hardly like to record it—was formal. It had flower beds in patterns, bushes clipped into fantastic forms, trim gravel paths and china gnomes of red and blue a-squat around their fountain.

She took on Amos Mennacuddle as handyman and gardener, because Farmer Boase recommended him. Then she began to settle down and to adopt her new country rather than wait for it to adopt her. Being a sociable and active woman she threw herself, as it were, with one large gesture into the local life;

she followed the hounds in her car, joined the Women's Institute and even gave lectures to the members, attended every fête and entertainment and subscribed to every good work. She never checked her hearty and complacent manners to observe the lack of response among her neighbours and remained unaware that they sealed their lips and their hearts in her presence. Only in her relations with Amos did she feel, from the very first, a slight but queer uneasiness.

The way he looked at her and through her with his deep black eyes under overhanging brows was something in the nature of a threat; in fact sometimes that look actually sent a cold shiver down her back, for it seemed to say: "Yes, I know and understand every evil impulse you have ever felt." Yet she could not help noticing that, in his care of plants and animals, he was almost uncannily successful.

As for Amos himself, he was inarticulate and quite un-self-conscious about all such matters, but those who watched him at work, not curiously but with insight, would realise that his success was won by something more intimate than mere knowledge of the things that he cultivated and treated and cured. If a neighbour's cow were sick, Amos was sent for, and he would cure it with a charm; if the bees swarmed, Amos must come to shake them down; and no one was more successful with cuttings, grafts and layers. When he came to work, Zacky, his pet goat, was always at his heels; tethered in some corner all the day, Zacky resumed this shadowing function in the evening. The animal seemed to Mrs. Bonanza like some attendant spirit and the association of those two filled her with uneasy feelings.

She could not deny that Amos worked well, but once the garden was in being, with soil levelled, beds planted, paths trimmed, then strange little things began to happen. There were missing tools, checks in the water supply, broken eggs at the bottom of the basket, milk gone sour on cool days; and none so clever as Amos at feigning ignorance of how and when and why, when taxed with these misfortunes. Sometimes he would just stare at her with those unfathomable black eyes and sometimes he would mutter: "You'm pisky-led Missus." And once, when she accused him of losing a new spade, he said in a strange and

almost savage tone: "Tes gone where the badgers be gone to."

She had not observed the desertion of the badgers. But then Mrs. Bonanza had never taken off her shoes beneath the oak trees, nor had she ever paused to listen to the silence there. You only had to look at her once to realize that.

Sometimes she thought there burned in the coal-black eyes of Amos not only a reminder of the past and a threat to the future but also a smouldering resentment, the shadow of some grievance in the particular day or season. Never once did she suspect that he might be the High Priest, self-appointed, the last surviving guardian of occult forces haunting the oaks, the boulders and the badgers' earth. How could it ever occur to Mrs. Bonanza that Amos had, in company with those trees and stones, overstepped the boundaries between one created being and another and was now in some curious fashion merged with the animal and vegetable forms of that solitary place?

Amos served his mistress with deft hands, but his grudging spirit circled ever nearer and nearer to expression of a latent hostility. Mrs. Bonanza tolerated her handyman because she could not do without him but she adopted the habit of giving her orders to him in the form of little notes left on the kitchen table. Then two things happened to deepen her distrust.

One summer evening towards the end of June she went to bed early and lay down, as usual, with her blinds drawn up and every window open, but she could not sleep. Just after she heard the clock strike twelve she became aware of a light cast from outside upon her ceiling. She got out of bed and hastened to the bow window which faced into the wood. There, among the trees, she saw what appeared to be a column of light suspended among the branches, it was full of movement but it remained in one place and it did not increase in size, yet strangely and steadily it sent long flames licking up to heaven. No sound came from that direction, neither crackling of leafage nor human voice. Mrs. Bonanza had a contempt for nameless fears and she admired precision with all the force of her unimaginative mind. "Poaching," she said to herself. But even Mrs. Bonanza in search of an explanation could not, on second thoughts, connect that brilliant fire with the dark and stealthy ways of a poacher. She went back

to bed and the light flickered on her ceiling and she lay there watching it, a prey to such vague uneasiness as she had never in all her life experienced before.

The second thing happened when autumn was drawing on into winter and the thoughts of people were beginning to centre on Christmas. She had always been a fresh-air person. "It keeps one young," she used to say. So there she was, in her bathroom on a morning of November, drying herself with the window wide open, while the voices of Amos and the milk-girl from Farmer Boase's place came up to her. The girl was a down-at-heel slattern with a farouche air and a stammer, and seldom were any words exchanged between her and Amos except a brief "Mornin." That day, however, the slattern was charged with a message.

"Maister sez you maun axe the Missus ef she d'want waun o they fat turkeys o his for the Christmas. She maun lave him knaw in good time."

There was a pause and when at last the voice of Amos did come up from the back-yard it seemed to have dropped down to his boots.

"Hark ee to what I be tellin av ee," he said. "The Christmas be comin aw right. I d'knaw that an you caan't tell me nawthen. But the Missus she wean't be here."

Mrs. Bonanza paused in her towelling and a cold shiver ran down her spine. However, the day was fresh and her mind clear and resolute and she was not going to let herself become fanciful in this remote Cornish place that she had chosen for her home. So she dismissed the matter from her mind, feeling quite convinced that Amos was what the younger generation now call "bats."

Three weeks later she woke in the middle of the night with a start and found herself sitting bolt upright in bed, wide awake. Had she been a horse she would have had dilated nostrils, had she been a dog she would have raised her ears erect; being just a woman she sat there, hands pressed sideways with all her weight on them, intensely aware of some hostile force approaching her in circular form from all sides at once. She sat there pressing her hands into the mattress as if in levitation lay her only means of

escape. Soon she became conscious that the whole world was filled with sound so deafening that she had, at first, mistaken it for silence. Then she felt a choking sensation in the throat.

That galvanized her into movement and she sprang up and rushed for the door. Her lovely staircase was in flames, beams were already falling and volumes of smoke eddied round her. To dress quickly, rush for the back stairs, hurry to the farm for help and send for the fire brigade, all this was like one single action. But it was too late. When she returned to the house the roof was falling in and flames were licking greedily about the lesser portions of their prey. Amos was never seen again but his goat was found that morning when dawn broke, bleating about the ruins.

The neighbours were more than kind to Mrs. Bonanza but her passion for Cornwall was now dead. Nor did she ever speak much about her sojourn there when, in later days, she was settled in her new up-country home and people would question her about her life in the west. She would only shake her head and say: "Queer place. Queer people."

The burnt house is now a skeleton, falling bit by bit into ever more hopeless ruin. Brambles meet across the entrance road and the terraced garden is a wilderness and the china gnomes are broken into fragments and the fountain does not play. The badgers have never returned to their earth. There is silence in the valley and among the trees.

But when you go there now and stand beside the giant boulder and the venerable oak, you know full well that the silence all around that ancient altar has been *emptied of its meaning.*

15

GWEEK

It is time, in these timeless wanderings to and fro about the river, to linger for a while in an important, unassuming little place that has already been mentioned many times. In any account of the Helford river its name must occur again and again, like the chorus of a song.

So often I had driven through Gweek, that hamlet with two bridges that span high-tide mark on the main branch of the Helford river but always I had been hurrying on to Truro or London or some such place outside the world of our Meneage peninsula and always I would feel a transient sense of envy at sight of the quiet, self-contained, unchanging little village. When passing through I would always notice, beside the road, nine Cornish elms where rooks nest every year; the trees are rooted in the hedge, four on one side and five on the other and most of them are now half throttled by ivy. This appears to be the most precarious nesting-place, it has no privacy nor the shelter of any surrounding trees, but year after year the birds return to it. I would notice also the narrow spit of grassland, flanked by mud and water, where a pair of swans will build their nest year after year.

Nearly always there would be columns of smoke rising straight up from the chimneys of the houses, for Gweek is not a windy place, being nestled under hill country and even the river channel does not act as a funnel for east wind, having taken a north-west bend at Ponsantuel.

The surrounding country is like a horse-shoe, nearly enclosing the village, only by water is there any level exit. Five roads lead uphill into the world; to Constantine and Falmouth; to Halfway House, Perran-ar-worth valley and Truro; to Treloquithack and Wendron; to Helston through the new aerodrome at Culdrose; to Coverack, St. Keverne and the Lizard. Of the two streams that enter the river each under its own bridge, one has

its source in the farming country near Helston and Wendron and divides the parish of Wendron from Mawgan-in-Meneage; while the other, the Hele river, divides the parishes of Wendron and Constantine. The Hele river is fed by tributaries draining the bleak upland of the country, where the piles of enormous boulders all about the quarries are known as the "Junks." It is an ill day for earth-stopper, hounds and hunting people when a fox goes to ground among these boulders.

Gweek always seems to be a completely self-contained little place but it is also something more than that, something that defies word-description. If you wandered about England you could find many a village as beautiful but you would not find many with this particular quality, which is, perhaps, the Natural Magic of which Matthew Arnold wrote in *The Study of Celtic Literature*.

It retains an atmosphere of remoteness and stability in this our universe which has become a hustling market of competition between machines and new machines and more machines. Yet it is in fact anything but remote, being connected with the world not only by those five highways but also by the sea-borne traffic of the river. Ships come in to Gweek from many a far country. During its long history of trade in coal and timber, manures and building material, many foreigners, unnamed and unnumbered, have landed there; Dutchmen, Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards and Scandinavians have stepped ashore in that quiet place and after a few days or a few hours have departed, leaving no trace behind them.

Should you pass through it early one day, you might perhaps find it desolate as its own wilderness of mud and water on the lower side of the bridges; a wilderness that is flecked with numberless seagulls like white snowflakes or fallen petals of cherry-blossom, that is dotted with numberless curlews, mere grey-brown wraiths only a little lighter than the mud on which they stand, all waiting in hunched attitudes for the turn of the tide. Coming back a few hours later, you may find a birdless village and a great sea-pool that has almost taken possession of the place. Then, if you stop a moment and look down the river, you will notice that all the warehouses and ancient sheds on those

Gweek

spits of land that advance towards the incoming tide are now duplicated in blue water. They have acquired in their reflections a certain mobility and waviness of outline not proper to stone buildings. In such a high-tide transformation scene you may see at Gweek, or think you see, "old palaces and towers quivering within the wave's intenser day."

Many another riverine or sea-coast village may be endowed with this fluid beauty, being subject to that same day after day and night after night miraculous sea-change, but not many of them can present, like Gweek, the strange contrast of standing almost secretively remote among hills while perpetually offering welcome to the tides and ships of the ocean.

There came a memorable day one autumn when I spent a whole afternoon wandering round the village, the quays and the spits of land in company with a local octogenarian who knew every stone and legend of the place.

Only a few weeks earlier I had heard this grand old man "crying the neck" as he stood in the middle of a crowd on the highest field in Mawgan parish, holding the sheaf of corn in both hands and bowing three times towards the earth as he spoke the ancient formula.

"I have un. I have un. I have un." His voice rang out clear and strong and the answer came, three times repeated: "Wha-at have ee? Wha-at have ee? Wha-at have ee?" Then, bowing again to the earth and repeating the words three times, he gave the immemorial answer: "A-neck. A-neck. A-neck." The word "neck" was always cut off sharply at the end.

He had cried the neck as a boy, in the days when farmers, after vieing with each other as to who would cut the last sheaf of the harvest, would perform this ceremony spontaneously in their own fields, in token of the end of the reaping. In those days people respected their ancestors' wisdom and their parents' traditions and so they knew that to propitiate the corn spirit was a wise act that might bring them good fortune.

Nowadays the crying still takes place in certain parts of Cornwall as a set piece, being organized by those who cherish old customs. In the Meneage district, up to the time of the second world war, the Old Landlord celebrated the crying of the neck

every year, in a grass court between the old part of his home and the attached chapel. A night of full moon would be chosen, the farm men and all the employees would assemble with their lanterns and after crying the neck would troop off to the Great Office, which also was attached to the house, for the harvest supper. Then old tales would be told again and old songs sung again and often a guest of honour would be present.

Among the Old Landlord's papers he treasured a letter from "Q" accepting an invitation to be present at one of these celebrations. Sometimes, when talking of old rites and customs to a favoured visitor, the Old Landlord would take this latter from his files and read it aloud.

"Regattas being over," wrote the great Cornishman from his home in Fowey, "and myself at last cut loose after being dragged at the festive chariot's tail, I can sit down to write a few letters, and this, the first, is to thank you for yours and for so kindly fixing up a date to which we—all three of us—shall look forward. I once heard the neck cried years ago near Trelowarren. We, of a 'reading-party' (alleged) at Cadgwith were returning from a picnic party near Helford, and our hired bus drew up and we watched from the top of it. I can see that sunset yet and the long shadows of the waggons and the men running. It will be great if the gods repeat anything like that; but you at any rate are providing a better seat than the top of a Helston omnibus."

Are the gods of fertility ready to grant their favours for the coming season when they are courted, in these sophisticated days, under pre-arranged conditions? We do not know. I only know that the patriarch of Gweek was over eighty and that, since he was fourteen, his lusty cries have echoed at intervals round the district in harvest time.

Meanwhile I must return to our tour of the village. He took me first to the far end of the wharf-side road, pointing out objects old and new, and even non-existent ones, until I was in a maze between past and present. There was the old blowing-house, he assured me, pointing to a bed of nettles beneath an elder-tree and I tried to summon a look of intelligence to my face. "Copper and tin used to be smelted here," he said. Then he told me what an important place Gweek was in the heyday of Cornish mining,

when pack-horses were used on the roads that were little more than tracks, and how he had learned from Charles Henderson that the name of the ancient little port was derived from the Latin word *vicus*, a town, a name which might have come through the Anglo-Saxon *wyke* or direct from the Romans when they occupied Britain.

As we moved on he told me the story of the timber trade and I listened spell-bound, for while this ancient mariner spoke he was seeing with his mind's eye things long past, seeing them vividly as if they were beside himself and me on that autumn afternoon.

Deep water ships from Norway and Sweden used to bring timber up the river as far as Merthen Hole, an anchorage more than a mile below Gweek. That part of the river is now, as I knew, full of a certain beauty that will often invest ruins and relics as with an after-sunset glow. Many a happy day had Maria Pendragon and I spent sitting in the shade of the oaks beside Merthen's grass-grown quay. Picnic parties would come up there by boat in summer and would settle down there for the day, but in other seasons of the year that quay would be unvisited; in winter it would be so solitary that one could stand on the shingle beach, on the down-river side of the quay, strip off all one's clothes and have a dip in the water without anyone being the wiser.

At the back of that quay are the ruins of a cottage and of a long-disused lime-kiln and also the round foundations of what may have been an oven for burning kelp. Four hundred years ago there was a fish-weir in the small creek that runs into the woods of Merthen and beside that weir are traces of a pit supposed to be the burial-ground of sailors.

In the deep water opposite and just above this quay, the Swedish and Norwegian timber ships would anchor and from that anchorage the people of Gweek would bring the timber up to the head of the river in lighters that they themselves had built for the purpose. The gunwale of these lighters was, the old man assured me as he looked me hard in the face with an air of intensity and precision, from nine to ten inches wide; and I knew that he would be right to a fraction. There was little that

this seafaring man did not know about ships and timber, anchorage and voyaging. The sea was in his talk all the time, it was in his blood, in his memory, in his very bones. Men used to walk from stem to stern on those narrow gunwales as they poled the laden lighters up from Merthen to Gweek. When they reached the village the logs were tipped into a pool that lay between Wendron Bridge and Mawgan Bridge. From that pool they were taken out as and when they were required.

He stood still a while, looking backward in time, lost in contemplation of the slow and measured progress of those lighters, but I was far away, watching the rhythm of barges moving on the Seine and of gondolas in the canals of Venice.

I was recalled to the warehouse beside which we were standing, to hear him remark in a valedictory, almost funereal tone: "The last lighter was called *Alice* and she was finished forty years ago. Her bones are lying now near the bridge." Then he added, after a reverent pause: "There was a schooner built here in the eighteenth century. Her bows came right over the Wendron Bridge when they were building her. She was a hundred tons and her name was *Adelaide*."

By the time we had made the tour and finished the history of every warehouse, lime-kiln, shed and saw-pit on both quays, I felt as if I had watched through many centuries all the major and minor events that had happened in Gweek, for the seeing eye of my friend looked out not only to remembered horizons and what lay on the other side, but back to things that happened beyond his own memory and the memories of his grandparents, back into historic and even prehistoric times.

"You must see the Tolvan stone," he said suddenly, as we turned inland. We walked at a brisk pace up the narrow road that leads to Half-way House. On the way we travelled back to the thirteenth century when Gweek was the trading port of Helston and Helston had the right to hang its thieves at Gweek and kept its own gallows there for the purpose. After about ten minutes' walk we turned into a farm on the left and came suddenly on the stone.

It was a sad sight to see this ancient monolith, seven feet high, not standing in open country in the solitude proper to such a

venerable object with a long history and powers of healing, but squeezed into the back-yard of a cottage. When, in 1847, that cottage was built on croftland, the old monument, last surviving stone of a great circle, had fallen from its upright position. It was taken and set up outside the cottage door. Several blocks of granite were cut off it to make gate-posts and now, as you step out of the cottage you can hardly help touching the great stone, so cramped is its position. It suffers the daily contact of human beings who go about their business with the pigs and cows, the poultry and the crops, men rub shoulders with it as they pass in and out of their home, women hang their dish-cloths to dry on the edge of its sixteen-inch hole, it is a familiar object to them, just as their pump and their door-scraper are familiar.

That stone never should have been set up in such a place, or rather that cottage never should have been built on the site of the ancient grave marked by the stone. Its own setting was the moorland, its own familiar companions were only earth and sky. And now—

My guide was telling me its history while the friendly farmer looked on with a certain pride in his strange possession but it was pride worn a little thin and become almost perfunctory after many visits from Old Cornwall societies and antiquarians and other enquiring people. I laid my hand on the stone for a moment. "You are like a bird in a cage," I thought.

It was regarded in olden days as a magic stone and people would pass their children through the hole to cure them of rickets. As we walked back to the village my guide told me of one such weakly child, passed through the Tolvan stone in infancy, who lived to the age of eighty-four and reared ten children. Then he began to talk of a witch who had lived near that place and of how she used to go up and down, up and down the road and in the end she and her family became so queer that they *frighted themselves*. He also told me about Jimmy-the-Witch of Helston, who practised white magic and could take diseases off cattle. One day he was coming out from Helston to a farm near Gweek and had enjoined on all the village people strict secrecy about his visit, but some boys heard the news and waited for him on this very road and pelted him with "tabs" (the well-known Cornish

word for pieces of turf). They came at him from all sides and he had to run for it and that was the end of his cures.

There was one more ancient monument to be seen, he explained, as we came past some cottages rooted in the road, with never a porch nor garden wall nor even a gutter to bar public from private property, and then we were in Gweek again, standing before the old milestone that is beside the bridge. This he regards as his own personal possession, a relic saved from burial in mud at the hands of that arch-grave-digger Time. For, leaning over the parapet of the bridge one day, he had seen it lying in the stream below and had persuaded a man of Gweek to bring his cart-horse and a chain to drag it from the water and to set it upright in the grass.

"This one marks three miles to Trelowarren," he explained, as he stooped to pull away some tufts that were hiding its face. When the lettering was clear he said: "Now what do you make of that?"

On the stone were three archaic "ones" each like an upright Roman figure without any cornice or pedestal.

"Trelowarren a hundred and eleven miles," he said with child-like triumph, "now isn't that a curiosity?"

As I was trying to thank him for our afternoon he raised a warning finger. "There's one thing more you must see," he said, "but not to-day." He looked up at the grey sky that gave no hope of a sunset gleam. "It's no good going there now between the lights but don't forget to climb the wood and visit the Monks' Well and the old round camp at the top of the hill."

He gave me exact directions and then we parted, he to cross one bridge and I the other and I looked back at his sturdy figure and his determined walk with admiration, thinking what a glorious life this modern Ulysses had lived. His mind was full of knowledge, experience and memories, his heart was full of courage and at eighty-four he was apparently sound as a nut. One item of local history, however, he had never mentioned in our tour round the village and that was a recent event which concerned himself and which will no doubt be incorporated into the village saga and remain there for just so long as sagas and villages may endure.

Early in the last war there were several bombs dropped in the neighbourhood. Possibly the Germans were led astray by the lights of a decoy station near the Manacles that was destined to lure them away from Falmouth. Possibly they just happened to choose this country to jettison their bombs. At any rate, a bungalow in the outskirts of Gweek was demolished by a bomb and the woman in it was killed; in a nearby village an old couple awoke one night in their bed to find stars shining through the roof and themselves untouched by blast; and at a certain cross-roads there fell a bouncing bomb that shattered a house and narrowly missed three others without touching any human being. This last one, being a daylight bomb, was observed by our unofficial town-crier, Mrs. Nancegollan, who averred that she saw the plane which dropped it and distinctly noticed that plane, as it left the district, flying beneath the telegraph wires. There was also the bomb that nearly got our hero at Gweek.

Its repercussions blasted a gap in the granite wall that was his garden boundary beside the road. He came out next morning and surveyed the damage.

"If Hitler thinks he's going to get *me* down he's mistaken," said the grand old man of Gweek and he set to work to repair the wall with his own hands. This happened during that one phase of the war when quite a few of us thought it just possible that Hitler *was* going to get England down.

Light was already fading from that grey sky as I crossed the second bridge and turned left. Then I followed the road that winds up among trees to the War Memorial at the top of Roseveare Hill. On the corner I turned to look back at the peaceful village; smoke was rising straight as ever from the chimneys, peace was unbroken by sound or movement. "But such a tide as moving seems asleep," I thought, looking down on the quiet place reflected in the water. I glanced at the narrow spit of land below, pointing like a sensitive finger into the ever-changing river-bed. Two swans were standing there; the whiteness of those birds was an illumination in the autumn dusk. I remembered, with a thrill of pride in my neighbours, how year after year when spring tides are due and the work of the foolish swans is threatened with destruction, the men, women and children of

Gweek go out with turves and armfuls of grass and build the nest a little higher to save the birds' home from the incoming sea.

Yes, I thought, there is natural magic in that place and as I went uphill through the darkening woods I remembered Matthew Arnold again and how he quoted a typically Greek nature description:

> What little town by river or sea-shore,
> Or mountain-built with quiet citadel,
> Is emptied of its folk this quiet morn?

And then he quoted a Celtic one:

> . . . . in such a night
> Stood Dido with a willow in her hand,
> Upon the wild sea-banks, and waved her love
> To come again to Carthage.

There and then I knew, with the sorrow of one who has lost something that he was not man enough to find, that I never could put into human words the magic of a certain night when I had been, for one moment, in close communion with the soul of that little village by the river.

It was in the previous winter and I was walking home, eight miles of main road and bye road and lane, after a long day with Maria Pendragon. Both of us had aged a good deal since our carefree prawning days but Maria never will grow old in spirit and I was youthfully happy, as I always am after a day spent talking sense and nonsense alone with her.

I came down the long hill into Gweek by starlight and there was not a living soul in the village street. Nothing happened in that momentous instant of time; there was not even a sound nor movement except the unchanging burble of the stream beneath the bridge. I looked across to where, on the Treloquithack hillside, lights glowed from the chapel windows. That enormous chapel overhangs the village, close to the cottages but set above them. All the population was, no doubt, at worship there.

Then I looked up at the sky; and the silence of the road, the light from those chapel windows and the presence overhead of those congregated stars, all seemed to be one living, breathing personality.

That was all.

16

TWENTY-NINE STREAMS

It is not easy to explain to sane addicts of the high-road the fascination of crawling on all-fours through undergrowth that is the private property of foxes and rabbits, of inching your way through briars that prick and entangles your legs, of squelching over bogland that affords no foothold and threatens to suck you down at every step, simply in order to follow the course of a stream that is often nothing more than a thread of running water in a green twilight of your own seeking.

Many of the Helford tributaries have I explored in this fashion, sometimes alone, sometimes with Deb. She it was who gave me the title for this chapter, for when I folded up the map one morning of spring and announced that, counting streams and brooks and rivulets, there seemed to be about twenty or thirty streams flowing into the Helford, she tried out the possible numbers euphoniously. Twenty-two streams, she declared, would sound like a hiccough and twenty-three streams was poverty-stricken in vowel sounds, as if a person wore two waistcoats and no coat; twenty-four streams was too reminiscent of those unhappy pie-bound blackbirds and twenty-five streams was a discord and twenty-six streams was like a horse refusing a jump. But twenty-nine streams had crooning possibilities, it was a phrase that you could repeat to yourself with pleasure, and twenty-nine streams we decided that it must be. In such fashion are titles sometimes discovered.

My only fear was that my neighbour, Mrs. Nancegollan, would attack me with twenty-eight or thirty or even thirty-one streams, so to speak, and would demand in her high, unmodulated voice why "you writers never can be truthful."

I voiced this fear, half an hour later, when we were walking to the valley where sweet chestnuts grow and explained how my neighbour was out-size in voice and importance and all-pervading in the village and how her opinion, though never actually sought,

was generally feared, and how it excluded competition, like the siren's wail.

"Oh!" exclaimed Deb, "but we have one too in our village, only she's called Mrs. Menheniot. She's a terribly "breast-forward" kind of person."

We sat on a fallen log to suck our oranges and Deb continued her tale.

"She's like a ship's figure-head and nobody ever contradicts her. She likes main roads and front doors. I'm so glad you don't like them," she added, turning to me as if she had just made a happy discovery, and I was filled with proud thoughts because she had found in me some high quality hitherto unrecognized. "Do you know," she went on solemnly, "I do believe that every village has its Mrs. Nancegollan."

"What a dreadful idea," I said.

"Oh no," she reassured me brightly. "You can always see them before they arrive and hear them before they speak and then too the Nancegollans, as a race, can never dart nor wriggle, they're too heavy-minded, and they couldn't bear to be seen running, and I can do all those things when I see mine coming."

"Yours?" I said, laughing. "I assure you I don't own mine. She owns me, she has a tremendous power of making you feel so little, even about your own subjects. A giant would shrink away in her presence, sometimes I almost melt away to nothing."

"Don't feel under-sized," said Deb, in a pleading voice. "Get up in a tree and look down on her antics. You've no idea how it elevates your mind when you can look down on the crown of another person's head."

Then we buried our orange peel and made for the stream in the valley. It was during this walk that we formulated the three rules to be observed in following streams from source to mouth or vice versa. Faithfulness to the course of the water. Secrecy. Keeping dry feet, that is to say not letting mud or water in over the tops of one's shoes.

You might think the first is too obvious to be made into a rule. Following a stream? Why, it is an idler's summer occupation. You picture a fisherman with rod and net and bag, standing ankle deep in a meadow of buttercups as he throws his fly, or moving

at ease over level pasture from one pool to another; or lovers who saunter arm in arm beside running water and there is never a bramble nor a fallen tree in their path. There are no such sportsmen and no such lovers to be found beside our Helford streams. The fish are perhaps three inches long, at best, and there are no spaces for walking two abreast. In the tangled vegetation that borders them there are not even paths where lovers may walk upright, turning now and then to look into each other's eyes, nor any clearings where the fisherman may throw his fly.

Thickets of blackthorn and waist-high brambles border many a stream, boulders wedged into each other at tilted angles overhang the pools, black mud coated with golden saxifrage and prostrate boughs of rotting willows will deny you any foothold. Sometimes, fighting your way along in that green twilight, you may spend an hour to gain a mile. You must not cut across one of the incalculable bends of the stream unless you can either hear or see the water all the time, and water will play many tricks with sound. Sometimes a mere trickle over stones will make loud music while the same stream lower down on nearly level ground will be quiet as any canal.

As for the second rule, secrecy, if you see a house you must shy away from it or stoop so that the inhabitants shall not see you. If you have to cross a road you do so quickly, rolling off the hedge, hurrying across, clawing up the opposite hedge before any traveller can detect you. When you see a man working in fields beside a stream, you freeze, or take evasive action, stealthy as a thief, soft-footed as a fox. It is a disgrace to be visible when exploring a stream. What could I say or do if, at my time of life, some acquaintance should discover me in the act of creeping on all-fours through undergrowth remote from town or village or any possible objective? For our own sake too we try to keep the illusion that we are pushing on through wild, untrodden country.

I had my answer ready if some irate landowner should ever accuse me of trespassing; I was studying bird life. If he looked incredulous but tolerant I would expatiate on stream-haunting birds, adding some details about the intimate life of the dipper. If he looked angry I would apologize for trespassing and assure him that I always shut the gates.

The dipper, being seldom seen on our small Cornish streams, was a trump card but I seldom had to use it, for irate landlords are rare in Cornwall. Once I did find a dipper's nest in the upper reaches of a Helford stream and it was surely the most beautiful nest ever built by a bird. The dipper darted suddenly from its rock behind a three-foot waterfall and there was the nest beside that fall, domed like the nest of a wren, built of moss, wedged in a crevice, flicked every now and then by a crystal-clear drop of water from the small cascade. The place was very secret, full of dark green shadows. I wondered why the dipper should choose this home of moss and water, this haunt of low-toned music, while men, who are known as the lords of creation, make ugly pill-boxes for dwellings, with never a green thing for companion, with nothing in their town lives, save the sky, to remind them that the world is full of beauty.

The third rule might act as temptation to break the first, for often the margin of a stream is swamp or impenetrable thicket, and frequent crossings must be made. Nor does this rule seem to be in keeping with the stern spirit that impels the explorer forward. Yet it is no cissie-like aversion to wet feet that bids us avoid letting in mud and water over the tops of our shoes, it is a question of pride in our skill as path-finders, determination to make a track if we cannot find one.

Always, behind such a pilgrim's progress along the banks of a stream, lies the desire to achieve intimacy with that wild life of the country which is so reticent and mysterious.

Hitherto we have produced no Marcel Proust to give us volumes of research on the half-remembered days of the sparrow, no Virginia Woolf to chronicle whole hours' reflex movements of the rabbit. But if we see a fox slinking past before he is aware of our presence, if we stand and hear the robin trilling his optimistic song while undisturbed by our intrustion, we may gain a glimpse through a half-open door into a new world, or perhaps into that lost old world, that "other Eden, demi-Paradise" from which, carrying the burden of our habits and preoccupations, we have strayed so far.

Deb, of course, was the best companion for exploring streams, in fact she was the only one who would survive such an expe-

dition with a reserve of enthusiasm for the next. When crossing streams she would trip gaily over any fallen branch that made a bridge, while I watched her with envy, knowing that I must follow her by balancing on one sharp stone and another in mid stream and then fling my weight on to the opposite bank and claw my way up. On the other hand I could usually cross a bog dry-footed thanks to intimacy with wild plants. A plant of figwort has often given me foothold on mud and a tuft of rushes pressed sideways with a foot may support one for a second over a quaking swamp, so long as one remembers to hold one's breath at the critical moment in order to achieve lightness. Sphagnum moss is always a danger signal, just as rushes are nearly always helpful. Golden saxifrage is beautiful but treacherous.

We followed the three rules in our up-stream and down-stream explorations alike but we never could discover which of these two courses was the better.

Walking down-stream was, of course, easier but there was no mystery about the end, since we were both intimate with the river and knew exactly where every stream joined it. In walking downward too we could not go wrong but when we were going up-stream we realized that any tributary might decoy us away from our track to the source. There was usually excitement about the upward walk for we did not know exactly where we should find the source, it might be some tiny spring in the open moor or in a field, it might be a black, impenetrable swamp of mud, or it might be a no-man's-land of rushes. Once, I remember, we cried "Eureka!" in a small wood where our day-long companion of trickling water seemed to have fallen silent in a patch of black mud. For the sake of thoroughness we examined the upper end of that muddy slope and found another trickle issuing from another bog which, in its turn, was fed by yet another trickle that had issued from a spring.

On the whole I believe that Deb's choice was the wise one. It was always good at the end of the day, she said, to witness on the margin of salt water the apotheosis of our stream.

Those were good winter days when Deb and I explored several of the streams on my side of the river; other friends, to their shame be it spoken, would consider that one such expedition was

more than enough. When Deb was not available I made my explorations alone.

One of my solitary walks, on the other side of the river, stands out in my memory as a particularly happy day, though the going was not easy, in fact I had to go over rather than through obstacles, flattening the briers and bushes as I went, at a snail's pace, with the ruthlessness of a tank.

I was spending a fortnight with Maria Pendragon, to help in the glut season of her daffodils. The young Pendragons were married and scattered now and Maria lived alone in the middle of her wood. There were times when the memory of those gay prawning parties seemed like the memory of a dream. She never had been a Laodicean, always the work or play of the moment would absorb her whole attention and now there was a new influence in her life that involved neither work nor play but was as absorbing as both or either.

In these reminiscences I seem to have overstepped in a few short strides those years of war during which we civilians had no personal life at all, being caught up, merged, imprisoned in larger issues. We came out after being cheated of six good years of living, a little aged in body, greatly aged in mind. Maria had emerged in better trim than most of us but she betrayed the mental strain in a strange new reliance on the wireless which she now allowed to choose her amusements, direct her thoughts and even inspire her conversation. In the old days of intercourse we had always ranged freely, without any jolt of transition from one to the other, among things seen and unseen, matters ideal and practical, passing with the utmost ease from tears to laughter. Now there was no time for all that, in fact there was very little speech between us as we sat at her kitchen table, bunching, bunching, bunching, or snatching our meals. Now and then I would sally forth to help the gardener with the picking but Maria would sit in that kitchen from 8 a.m. until nearly midnight, with only one or two brief sorties to fowls or garden, bunching like one in a trance; only coming out of that coma twice a day to charm savoury dishes for me from a reluctant stove, and to toy, for her own meals, with some potted crab or the yolk of an egg.

The table at which we sat was strewn with rubber bands, which were more than likely to appear in our food or to be stirred into our tea. Discarded blooms and fragments of stems were cast on to the floor; as the day wore on they got trodden flat and the oilcloth became a glissade. Stale daffodils nodded at us from vases on the table, fresh daffodils encumbered our movements as they stood in water on the floor, in buckets, vases, tubs and slop pails. Finally the bread bin was taken into use and the loaves, pushed into a cupboard, became hard as rock. The gardener would bring more and more trays full of daffodils until there was no stepping-place for us on the floor. In order to relieve the congestion I would stagger out at intervals with a load of bunched daffodils, to put them in water in the garden shed but this was always a perilous journey, and after tea a very dark one, over slippery flag-stones and up granite steps. Meanwhile the wireless, which had a peculiarly shrill tone, was turned on and remained on hour after hour.

After seven days of this regime I longed for silence and the sight of something other than hundreds of gold trumpets waiting to be bunched. It was Saturday, my promised free day. On Sunday we would pick and bunch again for the Monday consignment; sometimes it was necessary to work on Saturdays also.

"Where are you going?" said Maria as she packed my lunch and I watched her putting into paper bags two hard-boiled eggs, bread and margarine, apples, and slices of cold plum pudding that was the gift of an Australian Food Parcels for Britain association, sent by imaginative friends who realized that England was still hungry.

"There's a very beautiful valley near here that I've always wanted to see," I replied rather sheepishly, trying to conceal, as lunatics often do, a dominant obsession. Not even to Maria could I explain that secret understanding which there was between any Helford stream and myself.

I set out on the day's walk, not seeking this or that or the other, but open-minded, empty-minded in fact, ready to welcome whatever I might find. As I left the Pendragon woods and stood on high open ground, I looked back towards the mouth of the river. Mist came driving in from the sea, mist hung over the

fields of the opposite shore, attenuating their greenness to an exquisite pale shade, mist hung like a curtain in the woods behind me and the heavy drops of moisture would be laying, as I well knew, the daffodils flat on the ground. But I was bent on forgetting those importunate golden hordes that sprang from the ground fully petalled, or so it seemed to the picker, as warriors appeared in full panoply when Cadmus sowed the dragon's teeth.

A more forlorn countryside I had seldom seen but the whole day was my own I thought with satisfaction as I turned into the road and a moment later I stopped to gaze at a miniature miracle. This, on a bush of ivy, was the sulphur-yellow corymb of one seed-head from which the black berries had fallen, and it was perfect as any star. Then I saw a glint of gold beyond a hedge and clambering half-way up could look over at a willow-tree with all its flower-heads fully stamened, each one yellow and fluffy as a young chicken. A few yards further on there were three white tiny stars in a hedge and I knew, with a lift of the spirit that comes always at first sight of the stitch-wort flower, that spring was on the way.

Down in an orchard a missel-thrush was singing his arrogant song from the highest bough of the highest apple-tree, and he filled me with his own hopefulness, so that as I walked on through the cold mist it was as if I were walking in sunshine.

I came to a lane diverging from the road and a cluster of houses that dominated my stream and there was no privacy, so I followed that lane until gardens gave way to fields, then I clawed up a hedge and slithered into a field that sloped to the stream which ran clear, quiet and brown as a leat. There was no footpath on either side and I wriggled through a fence of brambles, chestnut-paling and barbed wire and came to a small torrent among stones and boulders. How good it was to be in the granite country. Those houses already seemed to be leagues behind me.

It is not easy to remember in connected form the stages of that journey up the secret valley, for I soon lost myself in the beauty of a strange world. Hour after hour I pushed my way up beside that stream, crossing perpetually from bogs overlaid with golden saxifrage to thickets of brambles and blackthorn, or back again whenever a bog was too soft or a thicket too dense.

Come with me into that green twilight which reigns between running water and leafless trees. Overhead in the wintry trees there is austerity of outline, each twig being in silhouette, and austerity of colour, with grey and brown predominant. The daylight, filtered through branches and falling on undergrowth, is mysterious and faintly green. Every flitting movement of the small birds can be observed. There is no chorus of bird-song, there are isolated notes and movements that make sharp impressions on you as you listen and watch, the clumsy flutter of a pigeon coming out from a holly-tree, the harsh warning cry of a jay and the mocking laugh of a green woodpecker, the song of the optimistic robin and the watch-winding churr of the busy wren from an undergrowth of fern. A buzzard is mewing overhead, he seems to be patrolling the forecourts of heaven at leisure. The chiff-chaff, with two reiterated notes, proclaims his arrival to all whom it may concern. Tits in foraging parties make jointed movements from one tree to another.

Naked trees and subdued light, bird chatter rather than bird song, few leaves and hardly any flowers, yet you feel as if you had entered a secret place full of great riches. You are noticing, as never before, the infinite variety of form in the winter world, the wide range of colour in greys and browns and greens, particularly in greens. There are, darkest of all, the glossy leaves of holly, silver in the middle of each leaf where it can catch and hold the light; dark green oak boughs that are overgrown with moss and with the forms of polypody ferns lined out on those branches with a Greek beauty, as if they were a frieze of dancing figures only a little paler than the moss in which they are rooted; emerald green of moss underfoot when you emerge from thickets to open ground beneath the oaks. There is also the sinister green of liverwort that clings like a vampire to stone or earth where overhanging banks of the stream afford cavernous shade; yet these strange plants, whose secrets were known to potion-brewing witches, have a transparent silver beauty when they put forth young growth.

The stream itself is brown, the fallen leaves are brown, the tree-stems are brown and corrugated, or silvery and smooth, or greened with moss. The hazel stems are pure silver. Grey, in

exuberant mood, will often overstep its boundaries to become silver, as brown will stray into the confines of gold.

Even with all this enumeration of colours seen and bird-notes heard, it is not easy to make a picture of that secret valley on the morning of my whole holiday in March. I was ecstatically alone with the stream and the mosses and the trees. A clump of white wood-sorrel was in flower at my feet where I stood still for a few moments, it was hanging fragile heads over a bed of moss. On the blackthorn bushes there were small pink buds.

And then, with a flash of sulphur-yellow, one brimstone butterfly flitted across the glade.

A moment later, looking up as I crossed that glade, I saw eight buzzards spiralling in a vault of blue sky with slow and stately movements, they seemed to have reached the very gates of heaven. But already I had found my own heaven on earth, in the glimpse of one sunlit brimstone butterfly, harbinger of spring.

Yet on that happy day, shall I confess it, I never reached the source of the stream. Arriving at a bye-road where the running water was confined for a few yards beneath a bridge, I took my bearings and struck homeward to Maria, across fields and little woods, down winding lanes, in a mood of deep contentment. An unfinished pilgrimage? Yes, but I had found something beyond all price, something beside which any visible thing was of small account. I had felt, like a soft wind in my face, the actual coming of spring.

When I reached the high fields above the oak woods darkness was already creeping in from the sea-horizon to enfold the river and its shores. I found Maria seated in a sea of gold, bunching serenely the flowers that she had picked, alone with the melody of popular tunes that filled the kitchen with billows of sound which were crackling and hissing and breaking into fragments and renewing themselves, only to repeat the whole performance again and again.

So together we bunched those daffodils until every tray was empty. What Maria's private heaven was I do not know; for myself, I was back again retracing every step, reliving every moment of my progress up the secret valley.

17

THE QUIET RIVER

That sense of quietude which Maria Pendragon and I had experienced long ago among the bluebells was often to be found along the banks of the river; sometimes when wandering about alone I would feel its presence there almost as if it were a living companion.

Was it an emanation from the water, with power to affect not only visible things but also human moods and aspirations? I have seen those woods and fields, inescapably reflected in water or in shining mud, tender in colour, inchoate in form, as if they belonged to the spirit world. Often, when ruffled or confused in mind, I would go down to the river in half-conscious search for help and would return home with a new reserve of power, able to ride above the storms raised by my own self-contradicting nature.

Many different kinds of person were, unconsciously, responsive to the influence of the river. Even those prawning parties, those long days spent in continuous activity, would leave us with a deeper satisfaction than that of tired limbs at rest, a deeper joy than the triumph of having acquired something for nothing from the depths of the sea. An indescribable peace of mind would descend like a blessing on each one of us, or so I always felt when such a day of perpetual movement was at an end.

Then there was Mrs. Zachariah Loam; and also some of her like-minded friends and neighbours. I do not suppose that Mrs. Loam had ever attempted to put into words the instinct that led her, Sunday after Sunday, to get out the pram and wheel her baby downhill to the river and back, instead of choosing the easy and flat road to the downs. Years before that time she herself had been taken in her pram to the same beach, in fact every mother and baby of that family "belonged to" go there of a Sunday afternoon, in company with mothers and babies of other families. What she went to seek, what she brought home in her head, or

heart, she did not ever ask herself. Probably not even in her secret thoughts did she recognize that during this Sunday walk to the river she had acquired a new measure of tolerance for Zackie and his black pipe and his untidy ways, a mood which would endure at any rate until Monday morning.

So Sunday after Sunday through the summer Mrs. Loam and her friends would meet on that beach of mud and shingle; all of them, having come down there "for-a-breath-of-air-like," would exchange the week's news or would even fall silent for a while under the spell of those quiet mud flats and the unrippled water.

There were other people who would recognize in the river some quality of beauty that would strike the very superlatives dumb on their lips. Never can I forget the first time that I took my old friend Wentie down to the river.

"Come for a walk," I said on a sudden impulse. "You've done enough work in the garden all this week."

I had fallen into a habit of sending for him when the market-garden work piled up on me. He took his thumb-stick and we set off, downhill, uphill, and then down again through the oak woods that border Vellan Tremayne creek. We walked along the green path, in a tunnel over-arched by oak trees, the brown mud flat lay below us with a blue snake of water in the middle. Between the underfoot moss and the overhead leafage we seemed to pass like disembodied spirits through green air. It was never necessary to talk when walking with him, nor to spend any energy on wondering if he were happy. I had known Wentie since he was fifteen and to me, as to many of his friends, he was always a background kind of person, by which I mean that whenever one went to stay with his family one did not seem to notice him but if he were away one would feel his absence all the time and feel it very sadly. No one had ever seen him pushing his way through a crowd, or advancing to a front seat, nor heard him take credit to himself when credit was overdue, but we all knew that he was a rock on which storms might break without leaving any impression of their fury.

There was silence rising from the moss, silence falling from the trees, only the cry of a solitary redshank, the *genius loci* of that arm of the river, seemed to open a door out of that quiet world.

We came out into a field which curved like the back of a whale ahead of us, obstructing our view of the water in the main channel. We were nearly at the spot where I had planned to take him and my heart failed me as I looked at his dark spectacles.

In all the years that I had known Wentie I had hardly ever seen his eyes and he had seldom spoken of his sight; we only knew that he always peered closely into books and took every footstep carefully, while in a strange place he would sometimes move about with his hands in front of him. We had an idea that, while his area of vision was contracting inch by inch as the years passed by, he could sometimes unexpectedly see distant things more easily than near ones. I could only hope for the best as we came over that rise in silence and stopped on the little cliff dividing grass field from shingle beach; it was only ten feet high and as we stood there, facing down the river to that wide expanse of blue water framed in woodland, we felt as if we were looking on all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. There was neither house nor human being in sight. One little boat lay quietly at anchor off Tremayne quay.

Wentie took off his hat and drew a long breath.

"Thank you," he said.

We stood there for a while and then we returned to work in the garden.

It is strange that now, whenever I recall past days on the river, I should be dwelling always on its abiding sense of quiet. Memory does not linger about those days when I rowed my dinghy down to visit Maria and found that all the expanse of water below Groyne Point was turbulent with white horses and that every time I looked over my shoulder towards the western beach my goal seemed to be just as far away as ever. Nor do I often recall that autumn morning when my boat was blown ashore half way between Bishop's quay and Groyne Point, blown on the beach beside Tremayne boat-house despite all my struggles with the oars and it was as much as I could do to push out again and row home, instead of continuing my journey. Indeed the wind can blow with concentrated fury up and down that reach of the river, lashing the water into a menacing sea full of crested waves. Yet, although I can, at will, summon back to

memory such scenes as these, they made no abiding impression on my mind, whereas I remember, as if it were only yesterday, the still morning when I first set out alone in a boat on the river.

It was long, long ago. I was staying, after a time of stress and strain, with a friend who lived near the mouth of the river on the Falmouth side. She was one of those rare people who would allow a guest to take sandwiches and cake and to disappear for a whole day. In the evening she would treat such a guest as if he, or she, were a sane and useful citizen like herself, given to spending most of her time in public or private good works. On that occasion she provided me not only with lunch but also with a boat, and I set off to row up the river, then completely unknown to me. With growing excitement I left astern the houses at Treath, Helford Passage, Helford village and Porth Navas. The river ahead, that unknown line of tidal water, gave me a curious illusion, it seemed to be stretching upward until it lost itself in the embrace of unending woods which grew into the sky.

What a strange power has been given to memory. It can distil potent juices from homely matter. Often, in the actual moment of experience that is new or strange or terrifying or very beautiful, we are confined by a spell of dumbness and quiescence within that experience, having being swept away from our known landmarks into the new scene. We do not at the time understand the implications of what we are seeing, doing or enduring.

In the course of that long row up the river I certainly did not indulge in reverie about man or the universe or eternity. I was sucked into the magic of the hour, aware of nothing but of each stroke that I pulled with the oars and the surrounding woods, the water and the sky. I was just a little knot of power set in a small boat, moving steadily forward on a narrowing line of blue water. In the distance that arrow-point of blue would penetrate green woods and green fields but always as I came near the end of that line it would extend itself, only to disappear far away in a new vanishing point.

And that was all that was in my mind. With back turned to the head of the river, with many glances over one shoulder, all my energy and purpose was centred on the forward movement of the boat; but I never reached the end of the Helford on that day,

never even had a glimpse of Gweek from the last bend of the river channel. Whether the tide turned and I feared to get stuck in the mud, or whether my watch warned me that it was time to turn back, I do not now remember.

Yet I do remember vividly a fellow-guest at dinner that evening who questioned me about my day and I remember also my strange feeling of embarrassment, for already I was feeling that my journey up the river was not a thing to be discussed with any casual stranger; it was something rather precious and secret.

How far did I get, he asked me, and what had I seen? What did I think of Gweek and was it really worth the sweat of rowing all that way? For himself he preferred a sail, or, better still, an engine. I could not tell him the truth, that I had been exploring an unknown river in an unknown country and that the river ended, or began, in eternity. My answers were very lame and he soon turned aside to make other chat with his left-hand neighbour, while I was thinking: "How far? How far to what? How many miles to Babylon? What *had* I seen? Eternity beckoning me onward. The white radiance of eternity. Gweek? Gweek. What was Gweek? A little place somewhere or nowhere, lost among the hills of time?"

Memory was already reaping the harvest of that day which I could not describe to my fellow-guest.

I can still see that ever-receding point ending the narrow line of water ahead, can live again through my struggle to overtake it. Nor can I ever recall that day's journey without feeling the smallness of one human life compared with the enduring ebb and flow of the river. I see myself, remote and clear like an object seen through a telescope, a solitary figure in a solitary boat, moving forward on a voyage outside time and space. The silent woods alone had been witness of my journey.

Memory recalls another scene where man was but a traveller silhouetted on eternity, a scene far away from the Helford river.

Our steamer was heading for Torcello. We had left the island of Murano astern and were steaming east in the wide lagoon. There were islets dotted all about us; sometimes one of these would be connected with another by a narrow strip of green, a land survival in this wilderness of water, but a precarious survival

raised only two or three feet above the sea. There were some three hundred of us, members of the P.E.N. Club, people of many nations and all over the steamer the sound of our talk echoed like the sound of many parrots in one aviary. I escaped from the babel and found an unoccupied corner behind a boat on the upper deck.

The sky was brewing thunder and blue-black clouds overhung the lagoon ahead of us. Now and then a ray of sunshine would be filtered down through some gap in the clouds, casting an eerie light on the water and the islets. Surely never had little islands been so emerald in colour nor water so purple.

I was suddenly aware of a procession out there on our starboard side; there were figures walking in single file, walking, apparently, on the water. I looked to see what lay behind and before this procession of human figures. Behind them there stretched a narrow line of green connecting them with the islet from which they had come, while ahead that same green line threaded the purple sea and disappeared from my vision astern of our steamer. I could neither see nor imagine the goal towards which they were slowly moving. Seen from this distance the floating draperies of that file of monks covered the grass on which they trod and there they were, advancing with purposeful, unhurried tread across the purple sea.

At this point there is little more that I can say, for it is not possible to convey in words a sense of the poignant beauty in that procession of monks travelling from an unknown island to an unseen destination, with the purple lagoon underfoot, the emerald path ahead, the blue-black sky above. Our steamer was changing its course and in another moment they would be out of sight. Then a sudden gleam of sunlight fell on those figures, transmuting the black and green and purple to unearthly brilliance, isolating from all known experience that scene wherein the monks were slowly moving forward on the narrow way through infinity.

Memory, meanwhile, returning from that strange journey over the Venetian lagoon to familiar haunts, suggests to me that I have perhaps dwelt too much on the quietness of the Helford river, on those aspects of woodland, of tide movements, of cloud reflections that seem to be messengers from a world outside time.

Long intimacy with the country has shown me other aspects of the unresting river that never, in any night or day through all the centuries of its existence, has been absolutely still. Never, whatever may be its appearance on a windless day at high tide when the sea has filled every channel and creek to the brim and there has fallen a hush on the water like the hush that accompanies fulfilment, never even then will the river be "idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

If you stand on the height of land south-west of the Helford, with Goonhilly Downs stretching away on every side, you can look across the Lizard and Mullion to open sea which touches America; or, turning round, you can overlook lines of woodland between which the river is completely hidden; beyond those trees you can see the south Cornish coast up to where that great bluff the Dodman pushes out into the sea, while inland from this point there appears to be a range of snow-clad mountains, where the china-clay dumps of Roche and Bugle, Indian Queens and Stenalees are outlined on the distant sky. Turning leftward, if you are standing on the downs about midway between Coverack and Helston, you overlook all that part of the Lizard peninsula which contributes streams to the mouth and the southern shore of the river, sending down fresh water to Carne, Manaccan, Helford, Frenchman's Creek, Vellan Tremayne, Mawgan bridge and Ponsantuel. You can also see that high country far away where, among the gorse coverts and the little farms of Wendron and from the slopes below the granite quarries of Constantine, rise the streams that feed the northern side of the river, streams that flow down to Gweek, Bonallack, Polwheveral, Polpenwith and Porth Navas. In all this country there are currents in perpetual motion bringing tribute to the river, spreading through its hinterland like a network of veins.

A million million drops of water find their destiny by losing themselves in the river, drops that only a few miles away were bubbling up into light and air from a spring, or were seeping down through rushes to meet and swell each other's importance, or were burbling over stones on their inevitable downward journey.

It is not only the streams and brooks that bring perpetual

movement to the river. There is traffic to and from the sea. There are big ships that go up to Gweek and down again, making use of the movements of the tide. There are oyster-dredgers working like pertinacious bees as they cruise to and fro in the wider reaches of the channel below Groyne Point, working day after day through all the eight months that have an "R" in their name. In summer there are pleasure steamers coming round the coast from Falmouth, complete with ice-creams and wireless. These will unload their cargo of tourists in the narrow roadway of Helford village or on the quays at Gweek. In those quiet places such human flocks will alight like a "murmuration of starlings" dropping into a tree-top; but the inexorable tide will always cut their visit short and then peace will flow back again with silent movement.

In winter there are few vessels except the merchant ships and the fishing boats that frequent the main channel of the river. These and the men they carry, like the gardener with his spade or the farmer with his plough, can never break the harmony of that scene in which they pursue their calling, whereas collective tourists will nearly always strike a false note in the beautiful places that they visit.

Never shall I forget travelling once with a party of French tourists in Sweden. After an intensive week of banquets and discourses we were taken by bus to tour the country and were unloaded, on our first evening, at a quiet hotel among fir-woods. The ever-shifting voices and faces of the past week seemed to recede into dim distance and each fir-tree was restfully a replica of the next one. The French ladies of the party sat down heavily on wicker chairs in the glass-fronted lounge and looked out on the calm lake and the forest that encircled us.

"*Ah ! mais c'est formidable ! Magnifique ! Formidable !*"

Reiterated superlatives split the air. I remember hurrying off alone like a hunted creature, plunging deeper and deeper into the forest until there were only trees enclosing me in a protective wall, each one helping to guard the silence.

Perhaps one should always go alone, or with some chosen friend when one is paying tribute to beauty. How wise was Dorothy Wordsworth in desiring no company beside a moonlit lake.

Again, once upon a time, I was steaming south from Anchorage to Seattle among the Pacific fiords. The sea was like glass; it seemed a crime that we should break into that mirror by our forward movement. For all its vast extent it appeared so tenuous and fragile that as we leaned over the rail we hardly dared to speak or breathe. Two men came out from the deck saloon. They had finished their game of cards. The clean-shaven nonentity looked at the horizon and said nothing but the other, a man with a face like the face of the villain in the piece, said: "Isn't that just the quietest water you ever saw?" They both spat over the rail and went inside for another game of cards. Just then we sighted three dark islands far away, it seemed impossible that the translucent water could bear their weight. I heard an American voice behind me: "I guess this isn't reel. Isn't it just wonderful? It's like something artificial."

Most vivid of all my smooth-water memories are those of a journey northward through Great Slave Lake. This is the picture that I keep.

The water is not only still as glass but fine as spun silk, etherealized to a texture that seems hardly weightier than air; like a sensitive plate it is reflecting with precision every cloudlet that floats like a feather in the clear sky. Clear water, clear sky, each have a strange, impalpable look, as if they could bear no weight, withstand no test of time, as if they had no part in this earthly world, never a beginning nor end, no purpose, neither memory nor hope of change.

The Mother Superior who sits beside me on a deck chair is travelling to Aklavik with five other Grey Nuns of the North. She herself travels out to the world and back again to the north every few years but the lesser nuns go "in" for life and they have all their teeth extracted before they go. The Mother Superior has fallen into a reverie and, mistaking me no doubt for one of her flock, she murmurs: "I love to look out on these spaces and feel the power of God." Her hands are folded in her lap and there is a far-away look in her eyes.

Yes, it is strange how, in every part of the world, a still lake, a quiet river or a calm sea can lay a spell upon the human spirit; but, of all the quiet water I have ever seen, I love best our own

Helford river at full tide on a windless day. And among all the words of wonder and surprise and admiration that I have heard, I like best, for simplicity and depth of feeling, Wentie's spontaneous "Thank you."

18

GARDENS BY THE SEA

On either side of the mouth of the Helford river and along the stretch of coast that runs from Rosemullion Head to Falmouth, there are certain valley gardens that, once seen, can never be forgotten. Many an hour have I spent sitting or sauntering in those gardens, for the owners of them were always hospitable and friendly. The flowers that grow there are shut away from winds that range over open country and the quiet air is often heavy with fragrance. Many of these tongue-shaped valleys run down to some little beach where waves that have finally become ripples meet their end with a whisper, followed by one echo as they go sucking backward over pebbles.

In pre-war days one of those gardens had a staff of six men and all of them had employees enough to keep the paths and grass in perfect order and the shrubs well and truly pruned. Another one had a mistress who would set out after breakfast, armed with scissors and a long flat basket and wearing white kid gloves, and would spend whole slow leisured mornings picking and arranging her flowers. Some of the gardens were show places, famed for their rare shrubs and trees, every one of them was cultivated and cared for.

Now, in this post-war world, those who remember them in the quiet and comfortable days can realize how all these gardens have suffered from changes wrought by war and the silent social revolution that has taken place in our country. One of them is at the mercy of nettles and briers and another has passed into the hands of an owner who has no interest in growing things, while a third has to earn the money for its own upkeep by being thrown open to the public and among the others several have been turned outright into market gardens. Nearly all of them can only exist by sales of a certain amount of garden produce to offset the cost of labour. In some of them the shrubs, for lack of pruning and thoughtful sacrifice on the altar of the future, have grown

into a jungle, each one having become too high for its width in the common struggle towards sunlight.

Such is the outward aspect, in the 1950's, of these gardens by the sea, an aspect deplored by some earnest conservative people, yet for some of us their beauty is only changed, not lessened. The growing plants have less individual care but in their new freedom they have acquired something of the beauty of wild nature, a beauty which is in perfect harmony with their unchanged, incomparable setting.

The importance of the sea to all these gardens is paramount. It is thanks to the soft sea air of our western coast that the gardens are able to grow tender and even sub-tropical plants in the open air, freezias in a south border beneath the drawing-room windows, magnolias flowering in February, Australian and New Zealand shrubs seldom well-grown in other parts of England. The mild winters are responsible also for the very rapid growth made by certain plants which become, sometimes in less than half a generation, more like a tree than a shrub.

Then there is the view; in nearly all these gardens the house is perched at the head of the valley on a terrace which is the only flat piece of ground in the garden, looking down over the heads of the plants and trees towards salt water. Each garden, seen from this vantage-point, has a setting of incomparable beauty. No garden is completely beautiful without water; every one should have at least a little stream or pond within its confines, at the best an outlook on lake or sea or river. The older of these Helford gardens demand continual sacrifice of trees and shrubs in order to keep open that vista of water seen from the house.

There are memories that can become part of one's equipment for living and such, extending over many years, are my memories of these gardens. Things seen and apprehended time and time again or even once in an illumined moment, may colour one's world anew and in the secrecy of our unspoken thoughts a memory of long ago may be more important than the events of to-day.

I recall, in particular, two of those garden owners of the past who cared as much for the wild birds as they cared for their trees and shrubs and flowers, so that, without ceremony or legal aid, each of their small valleys became a bird sanctuary.

The first time I ever realized the wonder and the beauty of a bird was when I was taken as a child to see the owner of a garden feeding the birds that he had tamed. I was standing beneath two daturas, gazing up into the hanging bells that were, some of them, creamy white and some of them reddish orange, and then I was called to watch the master throwing crumb after crumb into the air and a great tit taking its food on the wing again and again. Never before had I seen at close quarters the brilliant black and yellow plumage of that bird, nor even noticed the difference between a blue tit and a great tit. Until that moment I had always thought that birds spent their time either perched on a distant bough or flying quickly away from us. Never before had I imagined that a bird could be friendly with human beings. That swift and sudden sense of watching a miracle happen has remained with me through all these years.

The second bird sanctuary that I recall was a less highly cultivated garden than the ones on either side of it and it always had the fascination of something not completely tamed. It held, just below the terrace, a tangle of wild plants near a pond from which a stream flowed through a wood full of bluebells to the beach. The owner, crippled in old age with rheumatism and only able to hobble with the aid of sticks about the upper part of his garden, lived his daily life among the birds. The first migrants of each species were carefully watched for and every arrival was noted in his diary year after year. Every visit of an unusual species was recorded also under its own date. The nests in his garden were left undisturbed and he would sit for hours beside that little pond, listening to the chiff-chaff and the willow-warbler. Every nest that was built in the garden filled him with a respectful delight.

A neighbouring garden that had a marsh and a pond in the lower part, separated from the beach only by a chestnut paling, was more fortunate than any other in the matter of rare bird visitors. Once a Squacco heron, after being seen in a secret valley on the Lizard peninsula, came across the water and spent several days in that small marsh and once a pink flamingo escaped, from heaven alone knows where, and lit into that same place and departed after three days sojourn there. This particular valley

was more sheltered than any other and once or twice bananas had ripened their fruit there; in the trough of the valley midway between house and sea there was always, in the time of azaleas, such a riot of colour and such a wealth of scent that you could stand among them and lose all sense of your own identity.

People from up-country and professors from overseas would make special journeys to see those Helford river gardens where plants grew in the open as if they were in a hot-house, making incredible new growth each year, where laurels attained the girth and height of immense trees. Season after season visitors would admire the beauty of the flowering plants: camellias, azaleas and cherry-trees, magnolias, myrtles, acacias, Himalayan rhododendrons, tree-ferns in the hollows, primulas and iris beside each little stream, all these consorting happily with primroses and daffodils and bluebells that, each in their time, clothed the steep sides of the valleys.

Now those azaleas have been cut down to make room for the ancient spreading camellias whose foliage fetches big money in the Covent Garden market. Now the owners of that other less highly cultivated garden have no time for companionship with birds, for watching the arrival of migrants, for sitting down in a sheltered place and taking notes of winged visitors, nor for observing changes of light on tree-stems and leafage; if they are to keep the weeds and brambles at bay they must spend their days working with hoe and pick and spade. As for the lady with the gloves and scissors, her habits have changed; slow mornings have faded out from our busy world to-day, faded out together with Victorian still-rooms and lavender bags and courtesy. For men and women alike to-day life is just an effort to crowd two hours work into one and to overtake that which never may be overtaken. For Time is inexorable.

The Old Landlord was the last of these garden-owners who was able to keep the flag of honourable leisure flying and this was only due to his disability, the arthritis that made him and kept him a slow-moving stay-at-home; for in his younger days when he was in the army, he was always known, so the legend ran, as "Speed and Spurs." It was this enforced regularity and slowness in his daily life that gave the wild birds their confidence in him,

for the unexpected jerky movements of human beings always seem like a threat to their safety. He never made a hasty or unaccountable movement but always kept a measured progress from house out to garden and from garden back again to house, day after day, year after year. He was to the birds a natural feature in the garden, like any one of the trees, or the bank of grass or the gravelled terrace. He certainly had a closer intimacy with birds than any other man in the district.

His tamed birds were always about him and, though the majority of them would only perch for half a second on the palm of his hand to take their half pea-nut, there was one bird, a marsh-tit, that he had tamed to approach him on the wing and to take the piece of nut from between his lips. On cold days of winter all his bird friends would become bold with hunger and sometimes, when he had split the nuts and filled his outstretched hand with them, as many as twenty birds in succession would come and pitch on his palm in order to snatch their morsel, blue tits being always more numerous than the great tits and the chaffinches. In the matter of friendliness, however, the chaffinches were usually more forthcoming than the tits; perched on the high boughs of a very tall yew tree near the house which was their own look-out, they would watch him as he walked slowly along the terrace and they would swoop a hundred yards, across a lawn, a path and a grass bank, to hop and flutter round him until they got their nuts. One hen chaffinch, named Fluffy on account of a permanently ragged wing feather, would even perch on his shoulder and when she disappeared after about three years her loss was a real sorrow to him.

His garden, unlike those other ones, commanded no view of sea or river, being nestled in a hollow some three hundred feet above sea-level at half a mile's distance from the nearest creek. Yet even that garden brought one many reminders of the sea. Curlews flying high above the trees would utter their wailing cries and sometimes in rough weather the large field outside the garden gate would be white with seagulls. There were occasions when, in a south-west gale, you could stand in that garden and hear the booming of the sea on the Lizard coast and even the moaning of the Lizard fog-horn, and there were winter gales

when all the shrubs in the south-west corner of the garden were blackened with salt spray carried by the wind.

There are other gardens by the sea, of quite a different type, and these have neither a planned vista of water to frame their loveliness nor any hired labour to keep them cultivated, but they, no less than those famous valley-gardens, are a feature of the Helford district.

They are nothing more nor less than the cottage gardens that may be seen wherever hamlets or little groups of houses stand at the head of some cove of the sea or some creek of the river. Nearly all these gardens are very small and in some cases they are nothing more than a two feet wide border between the road and the whitewashed cottage wall which serves as background and support for a rambler rose, a fuchsia or an ivy-leaved geranium. But size is not essential to a garden and in those little wind-free reservoirs of sunshine the flowers always look happy in their tiny plots.

Sometimes the garden is a cultivated patch behind or beside the cottage and there one may see in due season snowdrops, daffodils, auriculas and polyanthus, double daisies, wallflowers, gladioli, chrysanthemums and hollyhocks, a bush of boy's love, lavender or rosemary, or a sweet verbena plant against the wall. Nearly always the garden gives the impression of being a part of the cottage, as if, in order to atain this unity, they had grown together.

Some of the farms also have their own gardens, untended year after year and only beautiful in February, March and April, when snowdrops or lent-lilies or double daffodils have taken possession of an old orchard and now continue to flower there year after year without any encouragement. The double daffodils have an endearing habit of spreading into hedges and sometimes, at quite a distance from any dwelling-house, one may see a gleam here and there of their incomparable gold.

Last of all there is a garden that comes into no particular category but I have known and loved it and would like to pay my tribute to its pecular charm.

It certainly never was a show place and it was neither a cottage plot nor a market garden, in fact is was maintained only by the

love and labour of one elderly woman but it harboured many rare plants and it was a garden in the true sense of the word.

If I were feeling disheartened about my own garden I would set off across the fields and down the lanes to visit Mrs. Boquio of Poljigga. In every gardener's life there are times when one becomes stale and downcast and then the only hope for restoration of one's spirits and energy is to go out and visit a neighbour's garden. Not any neighbour's garden. It may be a castle or cabbage patch that you visit but the thing needful is that the owner be a real lover of the earth and of his own plants.

Somebody once said of a faithful local gardener who died in his prime: "Yes, he was *some* gardener. I mind the day when he showed me round his plants and talked about each one of them as if they was his own children."

It is that attitude that I seek when I go out visiting other gardens and gardeners. It is that attitude I always find in the home of Mrs. Boquio of Poljigga. This personal intimacy with growing things is associated with so many virtues; with humility and unself-consciousness, with a certain directness and simplicity of vision rarely found among city people; and also, more often than not, with a spontaneous generosity, for gardeners as a race are nearly always generous persons. Finally one nearly always finds in them an innate dignity. I do not remember knowing an undignified gardener.

Not so long ago Mrs. Boquio lost her husband. They had lived together many years on a small farm and now she was obliged to give up her cows with a great regret that had no concern with loss of income, only with her inability to offer cream and butter to her friends. She would look at her dwindled food supply sadly and remark: "Chuggie never could abide that theare margarine. Tes wicked oal stuff."

Some people who visit Mrs. Boquio never realize that she has a garden. They see only a rather ramshackle little farm-house buried in the leafage of its own small valley that is shut away from the world, standing about a hundred yards above high-tide mark. When passing through the white five-barred gate they have, perhaps, a vague impression of tangled greenery about them and then, a few yards further on, of some kind of glass lean-to near

the front-door but they remain unaware of the wonderful contents of that excresence on the house. They notice geese cackling beside a broken gate and then, from a dark hole which is scullery cum-woodshed, Libbie will emerge, bucket or broom in hand, hare-lipped, vague, incompetent, with jazz-coloured apron and flowered hat. You will stand there amid hen-coops and scraps of old iron while Libbie goes searching every hen-house with shrill cry: "Missus, Missus, a person to see you!"

But now let us start together and enter that place with a gardener's expectation.

The farm and outhouses form one façade which is partly covered by rare shrubs and creepers and partly by greenhouses which darken kitchen and parlour windows and contain, in pots and boxes, Mrs. Boquio's most beloved treasures. The first thing that you see within the entrance gate is a fine pittosporum standing against the store where the barrel of cider is kept; it is cider made on the premises of course, in an ancient stone cider-press, with pony and neighbours to help. Beyond that store, and all growing close together, there is a crinodendron and a pine-apple-scented salvia, the old fashioned passion-flower draping all its neighbours, a loquat, a choisya and then, most surprising of all, a lovely maroon-coloured abutilon.

On the right is a strange and rather suburban-looking erection, once the criss-cross wall of a wooden summer-house but now a kind of trestle-table supporting a sheet of galvanized iron on which stand many pots of chrysanthemums. Beyond this contraption is a hedge and the valley's little stream which trickles into the salt-water creek round the corner of the road below. The valley itself is, like so many Cornish valleys, a repository of hot, almost fermenting sunshine. Where the cider-shed adjoins the house those greenhouses begin and within them are whole families of cactus and geranium among pots of smilax and asparagus fern.

You will probably be favoured with a personal introduction to each, followed by a few moments of one-sided admiration as you stand there feeling very small beside their beauty, but the proudest of them all is a certain deep-coloured geranium, half red and half purple, which gained distinction once at a Royal Cornwall Show.

"The judges said they never seen no such thing before," Mrs. Boquio will tell you every time she displays it. "Take a cutting. Take so many you've a mind to."

Above the geese and the broken gate is a mass of Polygonum baldschuianum that has taken possession of all green things and crowned them, foaming and cascading over shrubs, hedge and outbuildings.

And now you have seen the whole extent of this garden without plot or plan, this garden without a formal flower bed or even an herbaceous border. You have only walked across a small farmyard, but the entire place, walls of house and outhouses, hedges bordering the stream, greenhouses attached to the front door, table of chrysanthemums, small yard with the cackling geese and rampant creeper on the hedge, all these are simply stuffed with plants, likely and unlikely, rare and common, strange and beautiful; every inch of space is devoted to growing things.

When social amenities between ourselves and the greenhouse flowers are ended, we enter the parlour and are soon seated at a tea-table fit for epicures. There is no single "boughten" item of food on the loaded plates. Our hostess, clad in a bright overall and a turban with a large brilliant clasp over the middle of her forehead, has dark, far-seeing eyes. As she presses on us one dish after another, never leaving a visitor's plate empty for a second, we watch her eyes and have a queer feeling that she sees deeper and farther than ordinary mortals see. She never speaks of people unless someone asks her a direct question.

Once I asked her if it was not very lonely in that small farm with only Libbie for company and she replied calmly: "Yes, she goes funny-like every month when the moon comes on, but then I can send her arrants by day and tis somebody to speak to evenins."

Our tea-table talk is not the usual inconsequent game played at tea-parties, a game of battledore and shuttlecock between minds that have no common ground and can only toss forth and back inconsequent fragments of gossip on mice and men and parish matters, any fragments that will avert a moment's cessation from the make-believe human intercourse. Mrs.

Boquio's talk is real talk, it is all about flowers and cuttings and grafts, home-made jams and wines and cordials. She lives, it is quite clear, not only with but for and in the lives of her plants. She is a single-minded woman and in her presence we have a curious sense of security and restfulness.

A visit to the Holy of Holies is reserved for after tea. This is a greenhouse opposite the kitchen, inserted somehow into that tangled hedge beside the stream. It contains a peach tree, a vine, many ferns and a whole collection of cuttings. Gifts of tender or exotic plants are always nurtured here.

To see her putting in a cutting is to watch a woman in a trance. No sybilline formula does she mutter but a simple command: "There. Now. You *must* grow. You *shall* grow. That's all right." I firmly believe that these ejaculations are uttered, not only when she plants them but each time that she pays a visit to her nurslings, and that it is sheer force of will quite as much as the possession of green fingers that keeps alive so many strange plants in that dark and somewhat under-ventilated greenhouse.

Every time I go to see Mrs. Boquio and her green family I come home again more humble and contented. Also more ambitious. Ambitious to acquire her independence of human beings and the serenity that she has won from long and close association with her plants.

19

THE NEW AGE

The moment has come when I must return from timeless days beside the river and relate what happened after the Old Landlord had been dead for several years and the Shadow had given up her charge.

After his death in the early part of the war she had gone away to do war work but from a distance she had kept a watchful eye on business affairs and when she returned home the property was clear of debt. For several years she lived quietly in the echoing Mansion, contesting her ownership with bats and rats and owls; and all that time, so far as changed conditions would allow, she had kept alive the Old Landlord's traditions, wherein justice and tolerance and understanding held true balance.

Of course nobody had expected her to carry on indefinitely. She was alone, no longer young, nor even middle-aged.

Nobody blamed her when she handed over the Mansion, the property and the income to the Old Landlord's nearest relative. It was true that he had been a rolling stone in his early youth but now he had left his callow years behind, had served in the war and was generally liked for his sympathetic, pleasant manner. The young generation must have their chance, she said, and everyone agreed with her.

It was a new age, when youth possessed the world. The old were now pushed aside and those who should have been mature had, most of them, left their bones in the soil of foreign lands or beneath the rubble of bombed areas or at the bottom of the sea. In any case the young, at that particular time, had little use for maturity. All the neighbours agreed that one must go with the times and it was a fair decision.

Before, however, proceeding to the end, the bitter end, we must say good-bye to Maria Pendragon and the others. She herself, stooping a little now, is inclined to move more slowly from one occupation to another but she has not lost her kindness

nor her gaiety. Wentie is long since dead but there are still a handful of people who say to each other, when they speak of him, "We shall not see his like again." The members of the prawning parties are scattered here and there and the Stranger of that Cuckoo Cottage banquet is far away in Africa. Mrs. Bonanza and Mrs. Lamley and Amos Menacuddle have joined the shades of legend and are only now recalled with a prefatory "Once upon a time." The two P's, happily married and now encumbered, or enriched, with three little he-P's, are watching birds in the intervals of work in Rhodesia. The grand old octogenarian of Gweek is nearly ninety. Deb is light-hearted and light-footed as ever, still emitting sparks from that lightness, but she is more inclined to make the day's walk ten miles than fifteen.

Before the change of ownership took place at the Mansion there was one startling change beside the river. It involved no erection of new buildings but it changed the character of the river as surely as the new Fleet Air Arm station outside Helston changed the character and destroyed the peace of the whole Lizard district.

The Shadow leased to an ex-serviceman and his family a certain derelict building beside the river. It seemed churlish, she said, to be always saying "No" to war-weary men who only wanted peace and a little home where they could keep a boat. So, after refusing to sell, she agreed to lease the building, the fact that they had set their hearts on transforming it into a home, despite its northerly aspect and the lonely mud-flats at its very door, seemed to be a guarantee of good faith and good taste and the lease was signed for a term of years.

It was a magnificent three-storied ruin, standing close to the muddy foreshore beside a quay and a coal-yard where ships would tie up and discharge their cargo. There were two cottages set back a little way from the shore but the place had always preserved an atmosphere of peace; it was a corner of England "the world forgetting, by the world forgot," a backwater of quiet beauty that gave happiness to the people of the village a mile away. They would come there on summer evenings to enjoy the sunshine or to swim; in a stretch of some three miles of river this was the only beach accessible by road.

The beauty of that building and the size of its granite blocks would surely safeguard it against the caprice of builder and architect alike. So everybody thought and so everybody said, as the work went forward.

Within doors the Newcomers made a most pleasing and comfortable home but outside they painted the doors and windows blue that was like the shriek of a macaw. I cannot forget the shock of my first sight of that blue from far off when I was wandering one day along the other side of the river. It was a colour that called attention to itself. That solitary place had never called attention to itself before. It seemed like a slap in the face to the tender blue of the river. I gave the house another look and gratefully remembered our climate; perhaps it would soon be weathered or faded, I thought hopefully. Then, more kindly feelings overcame my horror and I told myself that possibly the Newcomers had not been able to get any other paint. One had to take what tradesmen offered in those days.

Soon after the house was finished the Newcomers began to ensure their privacy, a process which involved keeping people out of their time-honoured pleasure-resort. They put a gate across the road of approach and pushed out a garden wall on the strip of stones where the women of the village used to sit and sun themselves. Then they built a landing stage across the mud, and in the pool where children used to swim there was soon a fleet of boats on which the Newcomers carried out repairs in the exercise of their daily trade.

The trouble was that in their eyes the river was not holy ground. They had their own active life to lead, they dominated the river so far as they could, gained their living from it, arrogated for personal ends as much of the tidal water and the shore as possible and swept the channels with their telescope.

Yet why should one use the word "trouble" for these small events? Except for a few Survivors who thought and felt as the Old Landlord had thought and felt about the Helford river and its shores, there was no trouble. After all, Survivors are little more than an unhappy minority and these particular ones should have known that neither blue paint nor possessive minds could destroy the beauty of the river. As for the village people, bereft of their

pleasure, there was nothing to be done about it; the Newcomers had not broken any law.

In due course the Young Landlord appeared on the scene, raising high hopes in all who met him. He was a slow-moving person with kindly intentions and a pleasant smile and a habit of parting from every new acquaintance with a "Good-bye, I'll be seeing you soon." They actually believed that he meant what he said. Perhaps he actually did. He was always ready to do a kindly act, particularly when he could do it at once and without much trouble.

So it happened that when the family on the quay asked if they could buy the house and strip of land outright, he cheerfully assented; and when they asked if they might build a hut on a prominent point lower down the river, he said "Yes" without a thought of past or future. How easy it was, and how pleasant, to say "Yes," to see smiling faces round one, to be recognized everywhere as a good fellow. It did not occur to him that destiny had appointed him a life-time guardian of great things outside himself and his small desires.

So the hut was built on those shores of the river where no human dwelling had been erected by the Old Landlord nor by his predecessors, on those shores which they had preserved, not in a spirit of miserly ownership but as a trust for all who, loving peace and beauty, might come there by land or water. Moreover, the people of the village were shut out from their pleasure-ground in perpetuity.

The Newcomers, having discovered that the Young Landlord was a "Yes-man," gave the hut a solid foundation and structure and then they completed its comfort within with a bed, chairs, cushions and decorations. The window-ledge was fitted with a telescope that commanded boats going up or down the river and persons wandering along either shore. To emphasize possession and permanence they set up a green water-butt for catching rain-water from the roof and built a containing wall round the hut and placed in the wall a small green gate. Beyond the clearing round the hut, the bracken, gorse and spindleberry continued their growth in their customary silence.

No longer now could any stranger, rowing up river between

the wooded shores, experience that sense of moving onward into infinity. The hut was visible from far away, a blot on its green background.

The Newcomers were now, to all intents and purposes, owners of that promontory and they could watch wild birds as closely and comfortably as if they had been their own tame fowls. For the old habitues of that shore the hut was like an uninvited guest in a party of quiet friends and some of them came no more to their old haunts.

Justice must be done to the Newcomers, who were kindly, well-intentioned people, accustomed to getting what they wanted without difficulty. But they approached the unspoilt beauty of the river as they would approach any other desideratum, a warm coat, butter for breakfast, bread and meat and coals. They liked that strange beauty and they were ready to take it with both hands. They now commanded many of the hitherto solitary reaches of the river with their telescopes.

Other changes soon took place beside the river and in the land about the Mansion. A large portion of land on the south shores of the river was sold. Probably neither the new owner nor the old one gave any thought to that "absolute beauty" which, for so long a period, the Old Landlord had guarded in his land beside the Helford, but no doubt the word "amenity" played its part as a bargaining counter in the sale.

Many people had prophesied that the Old Landlord would be the last representative in his county of the good type of feudal land-owner. Their prophecy came true. It was soon apparent that the old traditions were not dying but dead. There was hardly time to give them decent burial. In these hard days they demand of their owners far more than they themselves can give; they demand, amongst other things, incessant labour and self-sacrifice.

In a comparatively short time the Young Landlord had run through his enthusiasm for market gardening and any youthful desire he may have felt to follow in the steps of his predecessors. He took to his travels again.

Once the Mansion had given warmth and light and leadership to the whole district; with its fields and garden, stables and outbuildings it had been always at the service of every good cause

and every organized merrymaking. Now the place had fallen silent; brambles and nettles disputed the rights of flowering shrubs; moss had grown on the paths. On summer evenings the white owl would be hawking to and fro over the long grass about the house. Often the flowers would bloom and drop their petals and, from bud to seeding-time there would be hardly a human soul to come and gaze at them and say: "How beautiful you are." Ancestral trees had been felled, the hundred years' growth of two yew trees was destroyed in an hour. The once productive kitchen garden became a wilderness with a few oases of flowers.

No one knew why the Young Landlord had deserted his inheritance.

So time went on and a new generation arose and multiplied, with eyes turned inward on self-preservation. Those who remembered other days and other ways were a small minority but they would meet sometimes to talk of Then and Now.

There came a day when three of the Old Survivors, who had shared the friendship and admired the public spirit of the Old Landlord, met to discuss these changes.

The Cynic said: "Thank Heaven the Old Landlord's ashes lie beneath his beech trees. He is not playing a harp up aloft as he looks down on the place that he loved. As for those people and their hut, they'll be gone in half a century; or less. But the tides won't change their ebb and flow, we can count on that."

"Ebb and flow, ebb and flow," murmured the Dreamer, "the untouchable rhythm of the sea. No one can build a wall round that."

But the Traveller muttered to himself: "There's a certain type that will always carve initials on the most noble tree in the forest. Some people cannot leave sanctitude and beauty alone. Look at Hitler, raining down from the air thousands of spiked swastikas to stand upright in the Arctic ice. Yes, we've harnessed the winds and the rivers, we've begun to disembowel the mountains, we've littered the lonely places of the earth with tins and cartons, the gewgaws of our rotting civilization. I knew the Mansion and the river long ago, have dreamed of them in all my wanderings. And now . . ."

The Traveller spread out both hands in a gesture of resignation.

Never before had his friends heard him speak at such length, usually he preserved a weighty silence, for the pressure of things seen and remembered had choked the fountain of his utterance.

"Now," he went on, speaking aloud, "what will happen to us when we've pushed down the last defences of peace and beauty? The greatest of men once said, 'Thou shalt not live by bread alone.' And the Communists are in Tibet." He paused, then, raising one hand as if he were an ancient prophet prophesying doom, he added, "If only I had the power of magic I would put such a spell on all despoilers of beauty that the sea would rise in wrath to wash them away."

At this point anyone may ask me what right I have, through the lips of these three, to pass judgment on persons and things, on the Old Landlord and the Young Landlord and the Newcomers and the changes that took place in this New Age around the Mansion and beside the river. I have no right whatever; there are no rights connected with the beauty of trees and plants and flowing water. Rights are conditioned by laws in the framework of Time but the river and the life of growing things belong to eternity. Rights I no longer possess, nor any things of worldly value; but devotion to beauty never can pass from me while I am moving forward from Time towards Eternity.

For I myself am an Old Survivor, perhaps even *the* Old Survivor, since I myself am an incarnation of the Cynic and the Dreamer and the Traveller. I myself was the market-gardener at the Mansion, the Shadow, the Old Landlord's wife and then his widow. I myself was once the owner and the guardian of these Helford shores. Now I am the Cynic but also the Dreamer and the Traveller. It is to the Dreamer that I leave the last word:

"Ebb and flow. *Ebb and flow*. No one can build a wall to shut out the untouchable rhythm of the sea."

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